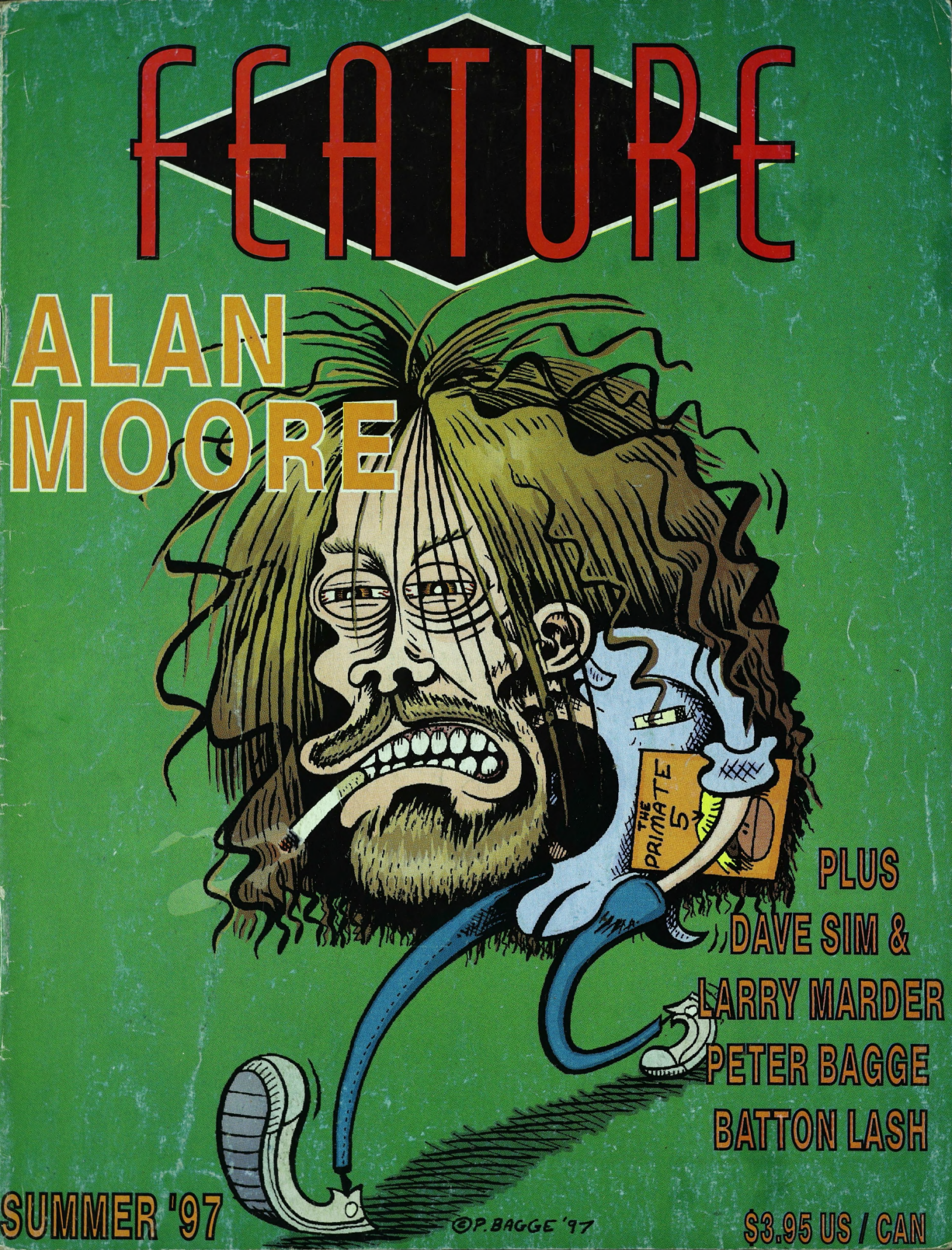
FEATURE

ALAN MOORE



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SUMMER '97

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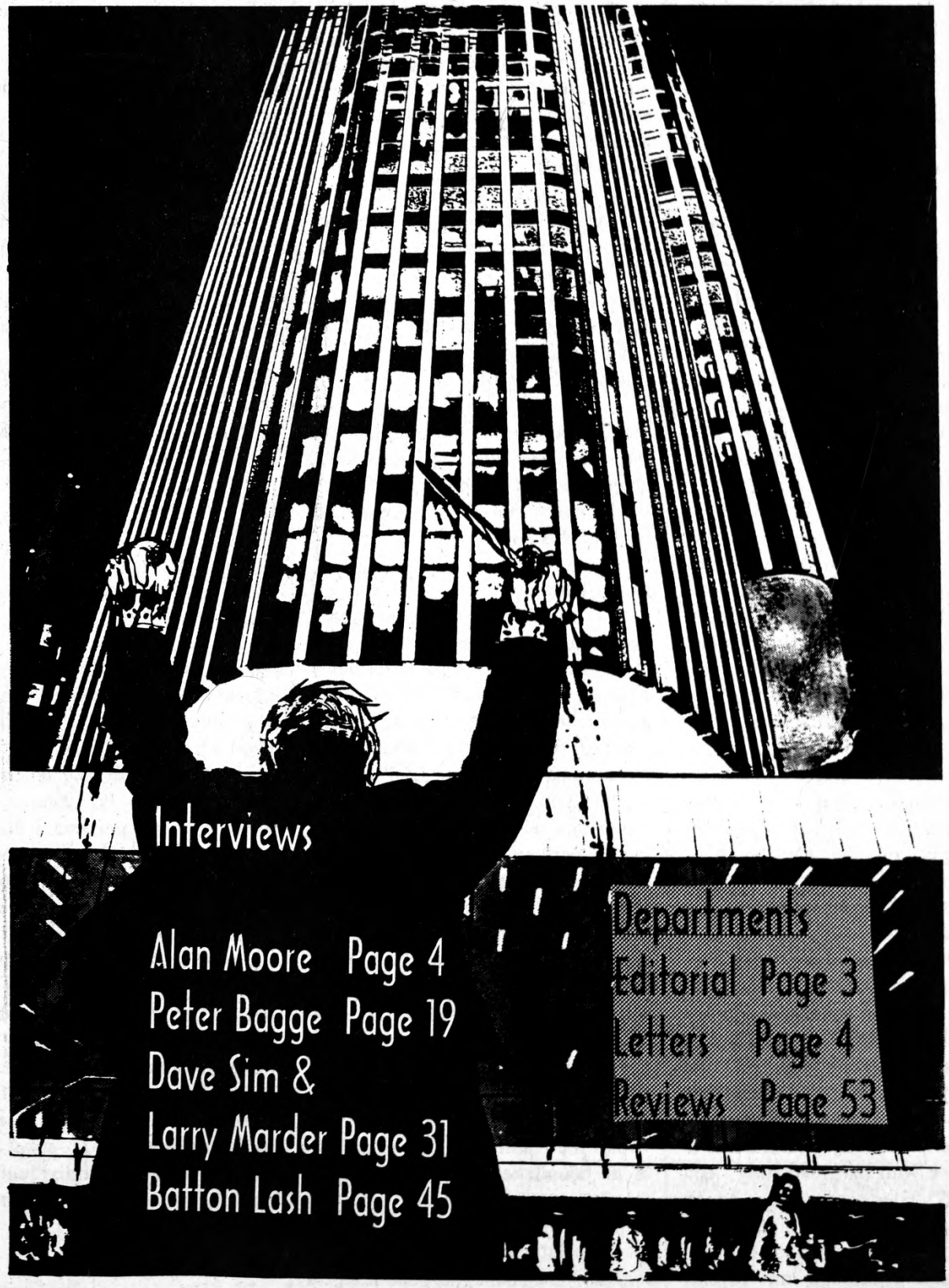
FEATURE

Feature Magazine Volume 3, Number 2 Summer 1997



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OUTSIDE THE BOUNDARIES OF POLITE CONVERSATION

PO Box 280507 Northridge, CA 91328-0507 FeatureMag@aol.com

Hi Charles,

I want to thank you for the comp of *Feature* Vol. 3, #1 that you gave me at Wondercon. So far I've read it all (except the Lapham interview), and enjoyed it quite a bit. I was impressed with the flow of the interviews; you asked the right incisive or leading questions at the right moments. Clearly, you had done your homework and exhibited enthusiasm for the work of the interviewees.

My hands down favorite was the Rick Veitch interview. I have read *Rare Bit Fiends* and I have a casual familiarity with Veitch's work, but I found the piece so intriguing that I plan a trip to Comic Relief in Berkeley to stock up on more of *Rare Bit Fiends*. Veitch revealed so much more of himself than he had in an interview with *The Comics Journal*. That too was a good interview, but there were statements here that completely resonated with me, such as "As soon as I started a dream diary my life started to come together." The artist went on to describe his experiences with the dream and they rang true. I have kept a dream journal myself since '78 and I'll back up Veitch's statements with a resounding endorsement, especially his recommendation that TV should be avoided. TV fits the profile of an addictive and debilitating drug. I wrenched myself away from it as a teen and I believe I have a far freer mind as a result.

You also asked Mr. Veitch where self-publishing is going, and he made some good answers and interesting speculations. From my point of view, a self-publisher needs to do a lot of marketing, and needs to be creative with that marketing. But that's decidedly secondary. As an artist, I plan on concentrating on the process of making art, on the rivers of story running through my psyche. Only after total immersion in the process of creating art would I consider "How do I sell this stuff?" If an artist tries to figure their "market" before they create art, then they are not an artist. They are a commercial artist, a different animal that addresses its efforts to commerce rather than art.

That's enough blabbing from me today. Best wishes for continued success with *Feature*.

Cheers,
Steve Lafler
495 Elwood Ave. #5
Oakland, CA 94610

Steve is the author and publisher of the very well done graphic novel *Bughouse*. For more on Steve's work, check out the review in the back of this issue.

Dear Charles,

You've got a helluva good magazine on your hands in *Feature*. In many respects it tops *The Comics Journal*, most especially in its candor and attention to the fact that reviews are just that--reviews. They aren't meant to be the absolute final word on the books in question. That is one of the things missing from the *Journal* lately, perhaps the most important thing. To Groth and his crew, the fanzine--and that's all the *Journal* is now--has become something to be bickered over and bitched about. I like your vision better, Charles: a concise series of interviews which ask and give realistic answers to good questions facing the medium, and some of the most clearly defined reviews I've seen in *any* magazine, within the realm of comics or outside of its boundaries. The only thing I found wrong with the mag is something that's almost certainly due to financial constraints, namely, its length. A magazine this good needs to be bigger. Hopefully, an increased readership--something you all definitely deserve--will bring in enough to expand on an already proven design.

Being a very vocal advocate of self publishing--my own *Inner Creeds* is nearing a publication date--I found it very exciting to see so many from the 'photocopy wars' profiled or reviewed in a single issue of your mag. Rick Veitch, Adrian Tomine, David Lapham, Steve Bissette, Batton Lash, Jim Valentino, Paul Pope, Eddie Campbell, Jeff Nicholson, and all the small-pressers given column space in just the first issue was a real treat. You're doing a great job.

See you next issue...and every one after that.

Best,
Mark E. Roberts
Totem Studios
14915 Sabine Drive
La Mirada, CA 90638

Thanks for the very kind words, Mark. As for a longer magazine, hopefully this issue is a step in the right direction. That said, I can't imagine it getting too much larger than it already is. *Feature* is the product of one person. I do all the interviews, reviews, transcription, phone calls, and footwork associated with getting the book out. *Feature* is as much a self-publishing venture as any other. It's not because I couldn't have other people on board, but because like most other self-publishers, I *like* being responsible for the entire finished product. Call it being a control freak or staunch individualism, it is what it is. *Feature* is about individual vision and for better or worse, it is *my* individual vision.

EDITORIAL

I was on the phone with my friend Chris Staros who, for the purposes of this essay, will hopefully allow me to pick on him for a moment. Chris is a prince of a guy; his *Staros Report* is the only comics magazine I read cover to cover. I think his work is very worthwhile. But returning to this conversation... One day, shortly after the Spring edition of *Feature* shipped and just after he got his numbers on the 1997 *Report*, we were comparing notes on the business. In the middle of the conversation Chris said, "The one thing everyone in this business needs to be talking about is starting up an Ad Council for comics." I had to grit my teeth. Poor Chris had opened up an economy sized can of worms.

The idea, for those of you who may be unfamiliar with it, calls for comics publishers and possibly creators to chip money into a giant pot which would then be used to wage a massive advertising campaign introducing comics to the "real world." Now I will grant that its heart is in the right place. Who doesn't want to share comics with the rest of the world? We all know that it is an amazing and worthwhile artform, otherwise we wouldn't be such emphatic supporters of it. Otherwise we wouldn't sweat the long hours we do creating comics, hours that could be spent in far less demanding and more lucrative fields. I certainly agree with the sentiment of waging such a campaign. I think it's a *nice* idea, but it just doesn't seem to be one that can work or should be attempted at this point.

I'll put aside all the problems of raising the *enormous* amount of money needed for creating such a campaign, along with creating a campaign that can be agreed upon and is at the same time effective. To me, accomplishing those tasks is somewhat akin to attaining world peace or ending global poverty. Even if we could put together a knockout campaign that would air on every TV station in the nation, I still question the wisdom in doing so. It seems to me that comics aren't ready for the "real world." You don't invite someone over to your house if there's dirty underwear strewn about the living room. Likewise, why attempt to bring people into comics, whose house is not only overrun with dirty knickers, but people arguing about who soiled them in the first place?

Before we bring people into comics, we have a lot to sort out as a business. We need to come to a common definition of *what we are*. I could walk around a room of professionals, ask what comics are, and get about a dozen different answers. Are we a literary form? A research and development feeder pool for other media? Collectibles? Stroke books for sexually frustrated adolescents? (That one's a whole other editorial.) How can we tell other people about comics if we can't define them ourselves?

Now is not the time to be bringing mainstream America into comics. Now is not the time to reach into the real world and say, "Hey, look at how great comics are!" Comics, on the whole, are not that great. Comics on the whole are confused, unsure of themselves, and pandering to the lowest common denominator. There are, naturally, exceptions. From my perception, the work I cover is the exception. I can also recognize that there is merit to be found in some of the work I don't write about. But that said, I know comics well enough to make an educated judgement. Most people working in this business know it well enough to make educated judgements. But if someone who's never read a comic before comes into this market, what are the odds that the first thing he'll see will be worth picking up? It is an effort for me to look through the distributor catalogs with their blood soaked, cleavage lined pages, how would a new reader react to this? If the mass of comics routinely insult the intelligence of people currently reading them, how will they appear to the newcomer? These are all important issues we need to consider before reaching out to mainstream America. "Nothing kills a bad product faster than good advertising," and I hate to say it, but on the whole, comics are a bad product.

If we are to try to bring people in from the "real world," the first thing we need to do is clean up our mess. The only way to do this is individually. Retailers need to weed out the bad product and stand behind the material that they judge to have true merit. Creators need to accurately assess their work. Before you start a project, ask yourself if your work is able to compete with the best material that is out there. If not, it's time to head back to the drawing board. On the whole, comics needs to turn a jaundiced eye upon itself and take a good look at all its strengths and blemishes. Only after that assessment is made can we even *think* of bringing the rest of America into our world.

Charles Brownstein
Editor and Publisher.

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ALAN

At this point in my career, it is rare that I have anything resembling a fanboy jolt when I do an interview. It's not that I don't enjoy the work of the people I interview, but I have seldom fallen prey to that "creator-as-demigod" ideal that so many comics readers seem to have. Naturally there have been a few exceptions. There are some creators who sit at the top of my personal pantheon and who fill me with that fanboy electricity when I hear their voice on the other end of the line. Certainly interviewing Will Eisner left me with such an effect. The first times I spoke to Neil Gaiman and Dave Sim I felt that awkward fanboy electricity--something like the tongue-tied feeling of being around a girl you want desperately to impress. But that was years ago. "Certainly," I thought, "I must be above that kind of thing by now." Well, I felt it all over again when on a late night in March I picked up the phone to call Alan Moore for the first time. Butterflies danced around in my stomach as I listened to the "ring ring" of the Trans-Atlantic connection. I knew that I had nothing to be nervous about. Everyone had been telling me that Alan is one of the nicest, most approachable, and most modest people I'd ever come across (which indeed he is), but there is still something daunting about talking to someone whose work you admire as deeply as I do Alan's. The phone continued to ring and a deep voice picked up the line. I took my deep breath, introduced myself, and asked for the interview. Alan was nonchalant about the whole thing, agreeing to the interview without any arm twisting at all. I hung up from our five minute conversation with that "I WAS JUST TALKING TO ALAN MOORE!!" endorphin rush.

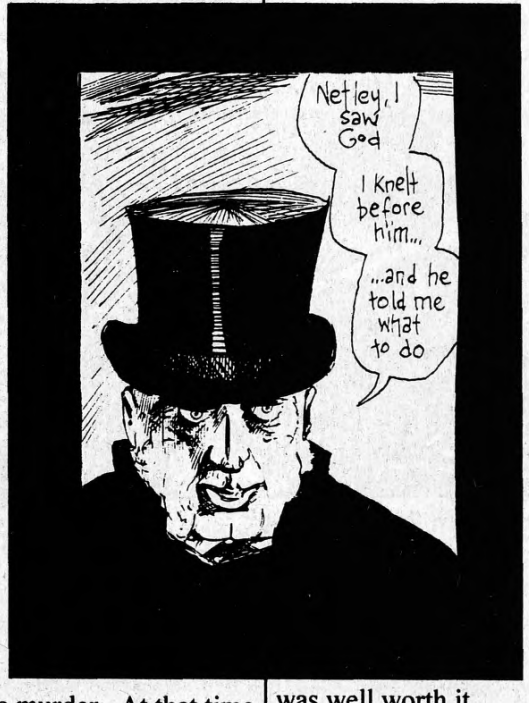
Moore is without a doubt the most significant writer of comics of the last twenty years, and very likely in the history of the medium. Moore revolutionized comic books with his groundbreaking run on **Swamp Thing** *with Steve Bissette, John Totleben, and Rick Veitch. That series, with its explorations of psychological horror, love, drugs, perception, and so many other shades of the real world, brought adult comics up from the underground and into the mainstream. His graphic novel* **Watchmen,** *for better or worse (Alan will tell you it was for worse) revolutionized the superhero genre. After all the other grim, real world superheroes are swept away by the great critic time,* **Watchmen** *and Frank Miller's* **The Dark Knight Returns** *are destined to remain the first and last words on the subject. After falling out with DC, Moore abandoned mainstream comics to pursue more personal visions. Early on this included* **Big Numbers**--*the notorious two issue series which remains one of the most significant abandoned projects of the art form. At the same time* **Big Numbers** *was being started, Moore began work with Eddie Campbell on what he perceived to be a minor side project. This project,* **From Hell,** *an exploration of the Jack the Ripper murders, would go on to become his most significant work to date. A few years into* **From Hell,** *Moore was contacted by Image Comics to work on what became* **1963.** *This series led to work on* **Spawn, WildC.A.T.S,** *and* **Supreme.** *Earlier this year, Moore finished* **From Hell** *which, in many circles, is considered the best graphic novel yet created. Currently he continues to write superhero comics for Rob Liefeld's* **Awesome Entertainment** *and the erotic graphic novel,* **Lost Girls** *with Melinda Gebbie, while also working on his second novel and third compact disc.*

Talking to Alan is an exhilarating experience. He is funny, fascinating, astonishingly intelligent, and incredibly modest. A month after our first brief conversation, I rang him early in the morning (for me, anyway. Alan's time is eight hours ahead of mine) to discuss **From Hell,** *art, comics, consciousness, and magic. The resulting interview, which was one of the best experiences in my career as interviewer, follows.*

MOORE

FEATURE: Who were you when *From Hell* started to take root in your mind?

ALAN MOORE: Well, I was somebody who'd just come out of an unusual and rather unprecedented experience in that I had emerged from the mainstream comic market as some sort of minor, bargain basement pop star which was certainly nothing that I ever intended to happen going in the front door, since when I entered comics it had been probably the most obscure and lowliest of professions. But something happened in the mid-eighties. There was this huge pop rush and so by the end of the eighties I had been through quite an unusual experience, one that I found harrowing and unpleasant in some places. I had finished *Watchmen*, I needed to think seriously about what I wanted to do next. What I didn't want to do at that point was more heavy, serious superhero work. It occurred to me that there are better ways of getting over political notions or moral notions than by having a guy in a tight costume. So I was thinking along the lines of projects that took me into different areas.



The first one had been *Big Numbers* which at that point was an ongoing project and a viable proposition. That was meant to be probably my follow up to *Watchmen. Big Numbers* was very definitely the thing that was intended to be the successor to *Watchmen,* something that would go further than *Watchmen,* and deal with different areas. For various reasons, that didn't work out. But at the time, back then in 1988, that was still on the card.

I was also looking at a couple of other things. I was thinking about maybe starting a novel and I'd also grown interested in the idea of detailing a murder. At that time I had no idea which murder. I'd looked at a few of them. I'd not even considered the Ripper murders because that seemed far too obvious. It seemed like an idea that must have been already strip-mined to death. Then, in the closing months of 1988, this being the centenary of the Whitechapel murders, there was so much material around on Jack the Ripper that I started to get interested. I picked up a few of the books, jumped from the Stephen Knight book [*Jack The Ripper: The Final Solution*], and started to see that there was the possibility for a different sort of story that hadn't necessarily been told in this form before. So that was the stuff that was in the air.

From Hell was originally intended as a side project to *Big Numbers. Big Numbers* took less and less priority as it started to collapse. *From Hell* took on more and more priority and became the major project that I've been working on for something like the last eight or nine years.

FEATURE: How did you move from having an interest in the Ripper murders to constructing a graphic novel out of them? How did that transition work?

MOORE: Well, I'd always planned to do some sort of reconstruction of a murder as a graphic novel. Like I say, it was just choosing which murder. So, really there was no transition at all. Once I decided upon the Ripper case, it was then a matter of finding the best way to tell it in the comic strip form. That involved quite a lot of creative decisions, not necessarily terribly important, but which had a big part to play in how we handled the case. For example, the most logical way to handle a documentary case like that in comics is to use captions. This will speed the narrative along swiftly, you'll be able to get all the relevant facts and details in a concise form, but it also distances you from the action. It's like reading a textbook. What we decided to do was to get rid of captions altogether and to tell it entirely using dialogue, so that we could get all the human nuances of these various people involved. So that you'd come to know them as real people by their actions and their dialogue *rather* than seeing them as historical representations that had only a sort of textbook commentary running upon them. So that was a very big factor. Eddie said at one point that if we had used captions we could have probably wrapped it all up within about a hundred pages which is probably true, but I think it was the right decision. I don't think we could have done it any other way, that's what gives the book its life to a certain degree. The fact that it is a fiction and it's human. The characters do have a human dimension to them which we could only have got by using fictionalized and dramatized dialogue rather than using the more distancing device of captions. Eddie's quite right, it probably added two or three hundred pages to the book, but it was well worth it.

FEATURE: How did Eddie enter into the equation of creating *From Hell*? How did his commitment as artist impact the story?

MOORE: Vastly. When I started to decide upon doing *From Hell*, once it occurred to me to do a murder and once it occurred to me to do the Ripper murder, then a lot of problems suddenly flared up. For one thing, the choice of artist would make a massive difference to the way the story was perceived. There's lots of wonderful artists whose work is wonderful and in other contexts would have been the first people I'd call, but in this particular instance you've got a case which has some slightly disturbing moral edges to it. Like any dramatization of the Ripper murders is to some degree profiting from some pretty unpleasant events. It's a fine line. You don't know whether you're exploiting the situation in the same way that, say, the stalk and slash film producers are exploiting it, so you want to avoid that.

Now with an awful lot of artists in the mainstream field, I would imagine that Jack the Ripper is such sensational material that they would find it hard to avoid giving it a sensational treatment. If you imagine an EC type horror comic artist handling the stuff, then you'd be getting into that sort of gleefully ghoulish, Wes Craven kind of horror film character, which is not what I wanted to do with *From Hell.* There was a good example--not involving Eddie Campbell and not involving *From Hell*--in one of the British comic books over here, a sort of forerunner to *2000 AD* called *Action.* It was a bunch of lame knock offs of Hollywood movies to some degree including a *Jaws* knockoff about a killer shark that was called *Hookjaw*, I believe. Now the original artist that they had on that was somebody who was very much in the EC tradition. If a severed leg was found on the beach, then the stump of the severed leg would be right in the foreground and you'd be able to see every little vein hanging out and glistening in repulsive detail as you would in an EC comic. Now this artist, for some reason, had to leave the strip and the artist that they got to replace him was one who worked upon British girls comics which were very sedate, sort of naturalistic affairs, and the style of art for them is similarly sedate and naturalistic. So when this artist drew a severed leg being found on the beach it was done in a middle distance shot, there was no unnecessary gore, there was just a severed leg on the beach and somehow that was much more disturbing. It's almost like by using the EC approach you're tipping off the reader that this is a horror story and they can switch their minds into horror story mode. The same goes for the music in a Stephen King film or the dripping, blood spattered lettering on a horror paperback cover. These are telling you that what you are getting is horror and that you can switch to a horror mode where you expect teenagers to be hacked up, decapitated, and all of these things and in some ways it's an entertainment.

Now with Eddie's style, with this naturalism, it all becomes much more real. You're not in a horror film, you're in something that is recognizably everyday life. Thus, when horror occurs it is much more visceral, much more gripping, and I can't think of a single other artist who could've accomplished that other than Eddie. The great strength of Eddie's work is that all this stuff obviously takes place in the same landscape. The moments of human tenderness, the moments of human boredom, and the moments of human atrocity are all part of the same picture and that was one of the things that I most wanted to get over in *From Hell,* and like I say, there's not an artist other than Eddie who could've done it better.

FEATURE: Was the story framed before Eddie came on board or was it something where he came on board and then you started writing?

MOORE: It was pretty well mapped out before Eddie came on board. That is to say I knew how I was gonna break the events of the Ripper case down. I knew that there'd be a prologue dealing with the inspector Abberline and the psychic Robert Lees that would be set in 1925. I knew that we'd have this episode setting up all the stuff about the royal baby. I knew that then you'd have an episode dealing with the early life of William Gull. I'd got all that worked out, but the actual form it would take--the individual scenes, the way the characters would be portrayed--that was decided pretty much by my conception of how Eddie would probably do them. So on that level, my knowledge that it was Eddie who was gonna be drawing it started to shape the way that I shaped the characters and the scenes so that Eddie could play off them to his best advantage.

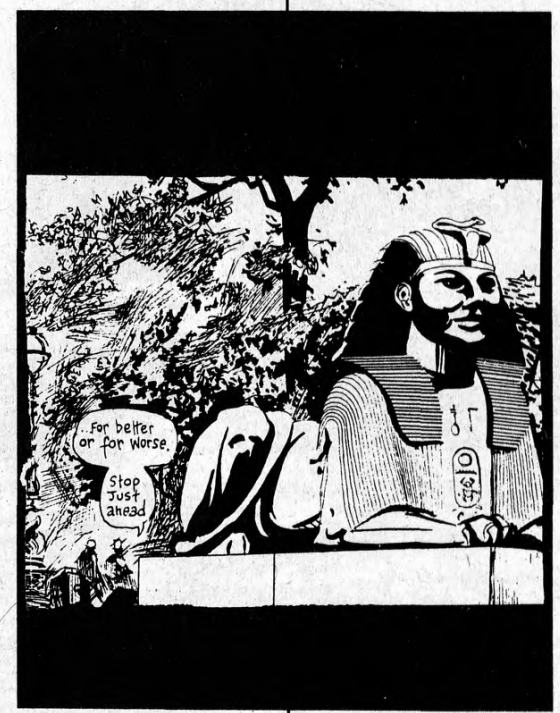
FEATURE: This may come off as an odd question considering that creating *From Hell* was something like an eight year process, but could you describe that process? Reading the book, it seems as if you'd written it in one go and then handed it over to Eddie, which of course wasn't the case. How much of the book was premeditated, how much of it was a happy accident?

MOORE: Well, a bit of both. I mean, there was a lot of premeditation, but the kind of premeditation that I go for allows for a lot of happy accidents. I was trying to describe the same process to Dave Sim recently for an interview type conversation that we're running in the back of *Cerebus* [*Cerebus #217*-220] and I described it to him as like, when approaching the strip, which is to say when approaching the research material, it's like the first rough sketch that you do is a kind of high altitude mapping. You're way up above the material, you can see the whole of it spread out beneath you, you can see the biggest main features; mountains and rivers and so on. You can get a sense of the landscape. As you approach it and get closer to it more and more details start to emerge. If you've got the basic structure right, then even details that are surprising should fit into it somewhere. For example, I knew that John Netley was going to die at the end. I knew that all this stuff about obelisks and Freemasons seemed evocative and had a place in this somewhere. I didn't realize until a few months before the end that the coachman John Netley had died after his horses hit an obelisk. There again, it didn't matter. It was a detail that fit in with the initial loose sketch. I'd left spaces for these things to happen.

There were an awful lot of surprises. They were strange little things that probably wouldn't mean anything to

anybody who hadn't been obsessively absorbed in all this stuff for the past eight years. For example, in one of the very early episodes with the first murder, I do draw attention to the fact that they're taking the body down Brady Street, which I knew I could probably connect up later to the later English murderers Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, the Moors murderers. I didn't realize until sometime later that the Liz Stride murder had taken place outside of some sort of packing establishment in George's Yard called Hindley's. It didn't occur to me, but it fit in. Like I say, if those first initial impressions are accurate enough, then everything that you subsequently discover *will* fit in, in some way. It's quite an eerie process, but its one that I've found on numerous occasions and in *From Hell,* that was very definitely true. So there were no real surprises.

I'd got the last scene worked out. I knew that the last line would probably be, "I think there's going to be another war." And yet, there were certain key points which I had got fixed in my head. I didn't know how I'd be handling the Marie Kelly murder until I got to it. I got an idea that it was all going to somehow be inside that room for the whole episode, but I didn't know what form it would take. I didn't know that some of the stranger things would end up popping in there. There was enough space left for the happy accident, but there was still a pretty tight structure there right from the beginning. It's the combination of the two that I find interesting, where accident makes design.



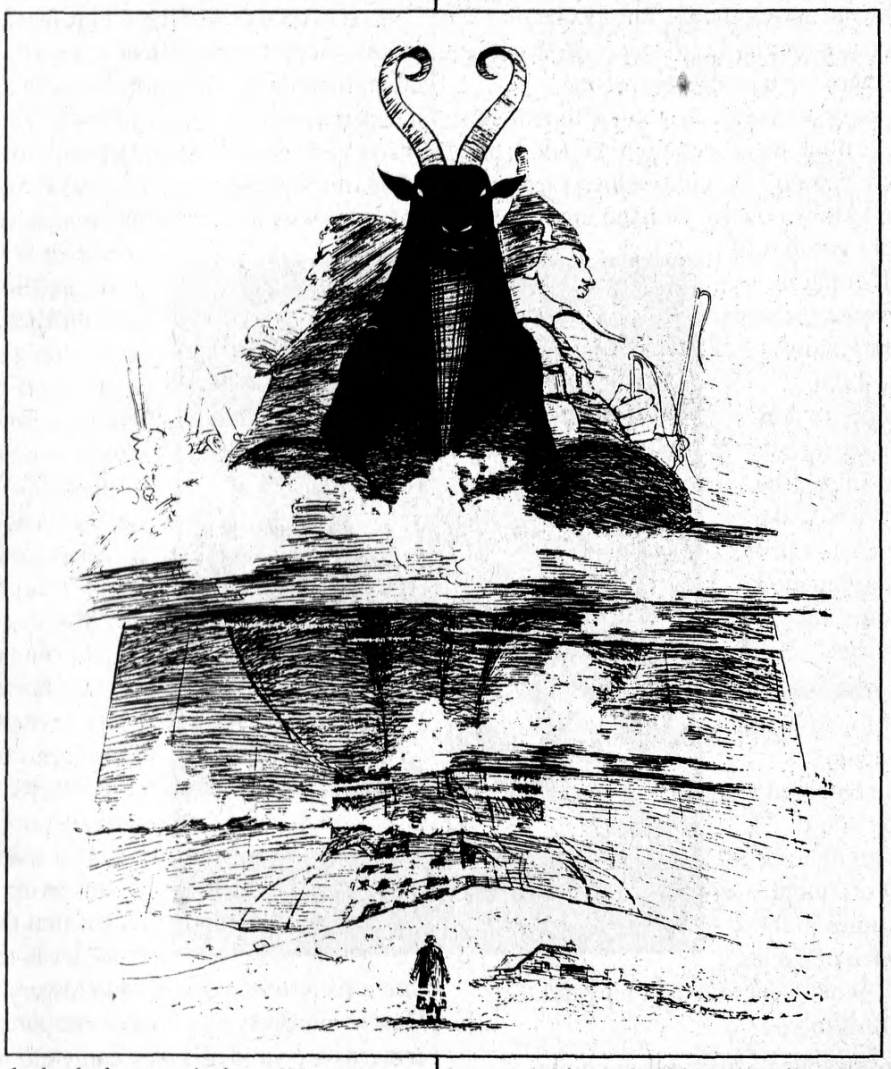
FEATURE: One of the more interesting designs that I found in the book was its cyclical structure. I finished the book and remembered at the beginning of the book you'd stated that the story was going to be a circle with that Charles Fort quote, and it was. Many other times in the course of the novel the idea of cycles, of circles presents itself. What went into that, how did this idea of a circle present itself to you?

MOORE: Well, I suppose cyclical structures are quite obvious ones, although when starting *From Hell*, I believe that the first quote that I used was from Charles Fort saying that "One measures a circle beginning anywhere." That related to *From Hell* in the sense that we start out with the murder of five people in London. A well known murder that took place in the late 1880s in London. Now from that we find that there are threads of meaning that stretch back as far back as say the Dionysiac architects of ancient Crete, that stretch into the architecture of London and London's history. That stretch into all these different areas of society and privilege that run all the way up to the twentieth century. I mean, Fort, as a thinker, prefigured later fractal mathematicians with their butterfly theories. Basically Fort said that you can't have a flower pot fall off a window in Hong Kong without it somehow affecting the price of rubber in Denmark or the state of someone's cough in Brooklyn. The whole system is connected and you can start at any point and from there you will find this radiant web of connections that sort of spans everything. Now the actual cyclical structure of *From Hell* was provided, I suppose, by having a pair of brackets--the epilogue and the prologue. I knew I'd be returning to that point, to these two old guys on the beach. Whereas in the prologue you've got no idea what they're talking about, by the end you've been through the story, you know exactly who they are and all of a sudden there is much more meaning in these two old men and their conversations.

Also, one of the things that comes out of *From Hell* is a sense of pattern in history. Now I wouldn't want to pin that down too much. I mean, for example, the pattern of serial murders are given in one of the last volumes. I'm sort of working through from the Monster in 1788, Jack the Ripper in 1888, the Halifax Slasher in 1938, the Moors murderers in '63-- to show this sort of curve that leads up through the centuries. I mean, yes, that's true, those are the right dates, but I wouldn't want to say that there is some strange supernatural periodicity in serial murder, that's not the point I was trying to make. That is a pattern I've drawn upon existing events, just as the pentacle is a pattern that I've drawn over real sites in London. It's a meaning that I've imposed. I suppose what I was trying to say is that history is open to us to cast these patterns and to divine from them, if you want. I mean, no, there is no pentacle over London by design. There is no secret society or conspiracy of Freemasons that actually put these sights into a pentacle shape, *but,* those points can be linked up in a pentacle and that means that those ideas, the ideas that those ideas represent can be linked up into a pattern as can events in history, like the events of the Ripper murders. We impose the patterns ourselves and those patterns are valid and they can yield interesting information. I suppose that the whole of *From Hell*, to some degree, was me looking at this morass of historical points of information and then seeing what kinds of patterns emerged from them to me. What kind of information it yielded, what kind of ideas floated to the surface, and I think that some very powerful and useful ones did. It's sort of that, yeah, the structure of *From Hell* to some degree mirrors the thinking that's inside it. There's a lot of complex ideas there floating around in the mix and this sort of circularity is not always as literal as it might appear on the surface.

FEATURE: Let's talk a little more about history. What statement do you think *From Hell* makes about the relationship between history and fiction?

MOORE: [Chuckles.] Well, this is something that I found out while writing *From Hell,* or at least something that I came to believe while writing *From Hell,* that there is no difference between history and fiction. That history is a fiction and I believe it is actually dangerous if regarded as any more than this. The past is *gone* and cannot be retrieved. We have our memories of it, we have our records of it, we have all these points of information, but then we impose a pattern. For example, with *From Hell*, there is nothing there that actually contradicts anything that was said to be true. It doesn't actually contradict the reported sequence of events, and quite dubious events as well are also brought into the pattern. Now what that is, is that I've taken the available information and I've come up with pattern that explains it all and makes it all appear to fit together logically. Now I've done that by using fiction. It occurred to me about half way through *From Hell* that what else is history? What else do we do but look at the incontrovertible facts and then draw the patterns around them that we choose? Looking at the far past that we've had entire dynasties of Egyptian kings where it turns out that this king that we're talking about is a nickname for a king that we've got a dynasty earlier. History collapses upon itself. We'll suddenly find out that there was a whole dark age missing. We suspected that there was a dark age sometime around the early centuries BC because there was a gap in scholarship, but we found out that our dating techniques had been wrong. No, there was no gap, we'd just made a mistake. So a whole century vanishes. The past is constantly being revised.



As is commonly pointed out, history is written by the victors. And thus in this case, the history that I learned in school is the history of church and state, who are very much the victors for this particular struggle. They won, they get to write the history. But, to me, it seems that history is very important, but is inevitably a fiction. It just depends which fiction we choose, whether we choose the fictions of empire that our governments have written for us, or whether we try to come up with something perhaps a bit more powerful, perhaps a bit more personal. Something that relates a bit more to us.

From Hell was an eye-opener in a number of ways, that being one of the chief ones. I suddenly realized that any history is a fiction. We know little enough about events that happened this century. I mean, how will history record the Kennedy assassination? *We don't know*. What exactly went on during the Falklands War? I mean, these are things that we can expect to be endlessly revised over the coming centuries: new theories arising, new evidence, new data. And that's just as countries, when it comes to us as individuals, our histories are fiction. We edit out certain facts that we don't think we care to be reminded of. We change things, we give ourselves better dialogue than we had at the actual time. We're unreliable witnesses, all of us. As long as we remember that, we'll probably do all right.

It seems important to me that I made a case for fiction as something that is valid. We have to remember that to some degree even our current experience is virtual, is a fiction. We don't directly perceive any sort of reality, what we perceive is our own perception. We do not see anything other than the firing of nerve endings in our retina. We do not hear anything other than the vibrations in our tympanum. Our consciousness assembles these disparate signals into what we call reality and that is true even of the garden I'm looking at through my little window at this moment. It's doubly true of what I remember myself doing last week or what I'm told that the British Empire was doing a hundred and fifty years ago. I think that we have to understand the fictional nature of the reality that we create for ourselves because sometimes we can enslave ourselves in hostile forms of fiction. Sometimes we can hit upon more liberating fictions, but I think we ought to at least know what the state of play is. That was something that came home to me very strongly during *From Hell.*

FEATURE: How did that realization inform your work both as you finished *From Hell* and created other work apart from *From Hell*?

MOORE: Well, you see, *From Hell* was a funny book. It wasn't just that realization, there were two or three major realizations that came to me during the eight years of working on *From Hell*. One of the biggest ones was that I was half way through a speech by William Gull in, I think, chapter four, the tour around London. Gull is patiently explaining to Netley that gods exist nowhere save in the human mind, nor do they need to. As figures in the human mind, their reality and their power is unquestionable. He starts to carry on in typical Gull style, you know, high flown sort of topics. I think he hit a line where he says, "Gull the doctor says that to converse with gods is madness, at which Gull the man replies, 'Then who'd be sane?'" I finished writing that speech and I stopped and read it through and I though, "Oh Christ, that's true." [Laughs] I couldn't actually think of a way around it. I wrote it as something that seemed appropriate for Gull to say and seemed to fit with what I was beginning to see as his philosophy and suddenly realized that here was a sort of argument for the existence of God or gods that was utterly rational in a strange way. That was almost inarguable. That was a thought that stuck with me and made massive differences to my work and my entire life. It was probably that thought, writing that page more than anything, that pointed me towards the occult pursuits that I'm now increasingly immersed in, which are obviously having a significant impact on the kind of artwork that I produce.

The notion of history as being something that is a fiction, that is for us to write, that had an impact in that it led to the kind of preoccupations that I show in the novel, *Voice of the Fire,* which is dealing with creating a more passionate, fiery, and useful, and liberating view of history from the reality around me. I mean this also to some degree links in with the concept of psychogeography, which is an idea that I stole from Iain Sinclair, and I think he had probably stolen it from Blake. The notion that the streets that we live in are composed of more than bricks and mortar. That we don't walk down the real street, we walk down the street inside our heads. It's not what the streets are made of that is important to us, it is the associations and memories that they hold for us.

Landscape to a degree is memory and memory is landscape. We imbue every feature of the landscape with personal associations: things we've heard about it, history, legend. That was something which emerged out of the research for *From Hell*, from my interest in Iain Sinclair, from strolling around the streets of Whitechapel, from looking around Hawksmoor's churches, from seeing all the points in the London pentacle, to try and see what those places felt like and what they meant and the kind of mythic associations that each one had. These were things that emerged in *From Hell*, but, like I say, I definitely have taken those on into other areas with the first novel *Voice of the Fire,* and with the subsequent novel which I'm just in the process of planning, which will continue from a similar starting point.

FEATURE: One of the things you were talking about in your recent correspondence with Dave Sim was the idea of delving into myth of something and the meaning of that myth. One of the issues you seem to be talking about with the history is that we choose our histories like we choose our myths.

MOORE: Mm hmm.

FEATURE: So what is the relationship that you see between myth and history?

MOORE: Well, myth is to some degree...Originally when we lived in hunter/gatherer cultures and we had a different sense of time and place and where our myth and our history were part of the same oral tradition, there was no difference between the two. I'd say that as we formed settlements, formed cities, we began to order our lives and our thinking. At this point there would be a separation of recorded history and what would previously have been called myth which would probably be formalized into a formal religion. Now, the main difference between myth and history is that myth is a timeless and eternal landscape that has nothing to do with the passage of linear time; history has *everything* to do with the passage of linear time.

The whole concept of linear time informs our view of history. We would say that this event obviously *causes* that event or leads to it and we say this even though our modern physicists get increasingly unsure about which way time's arrow is pointing. Myth on the other hand, is something which is always there and which is outside of time completely. It's like dreamtime, if you like. The Australian Aboriginals understand their landscape to have a timeless component that involves all of the myth and dreams and imaginings and history of that landscape. So a rock is not just a rock and a tree is not just a tree. It may also be the rock where such and such a king avenged some slight against his tribe or family. It might also be a rock that is one of the kidney stones of the sky god or whatever. The identity of that rock is composed of something a lot more complex than its granite molecules. That to me opens up some very exciting possibilities. This timeless landscape where the myths of the Egyptians or the Greeks or the Romans are not seen as happening in the past, but are seen as archetypal events that are constantly happening. Horus is constantly being born from Isis and the father Osiris is constantly being murdered, constantly being resurrected. These events happen outside time and they are always present. The history and fantasy and myth surrounding any part of our landscape is always there. The physical landscape changes, the mythical landscape doesn't.

I think that one of the problems that we have socially is that we have been forced into a view of history which precludes myth. We live in a historical landscape where war and economic factors and all these other things shape our destinies. We are out of touch with any mythic aspect. I'd have to say that, say, for example, Christianity reinforces that. Christianity insists upon a historical reality which is where most of my problems with Christianity come from [chuckles]. If they could just see their messiah or their gods, the figures in their mythology as real mythical figures that did not need to have actually existed to be real and potent, then they'd perhaps find themselves getting into less trouble. It must be difficult having to justify or explain things as if this was real and had actually happened rather than it had happened in the dream time. I find the concept very useful that you didn't have to physically believe in these entities. That you could believe in them as real myths. I find that a useful concept.

I think that there's a sort of political element to it. It strikes me that in order to ruin a place, in order to subjugate a people, the first thing you have to get rid of is their dreams. If you want to denigrate a landscape, first you must in some way debase the idea of the landscape so that it doesn't matter so much. If you want to debase a people you must do the same thing, you must first debase the idea of the people--their idea of themselves. You must first do some vandalism to the dream time. Once you've done that then the real streets, the real towns will follow swiftly after into decline.

I think that's something we probably learned during the Thatcher years over here. She debased an idea, a concept of England first. Once that was gone, there was no problem in actually getting the physical landscape to mirror the kind of rundown, debased vision that she had imposed upon it. So, that is the difference. That's the relationship between myth and history. To some degree this dream time is what we're all standing upon. It's the basis for the real world. Our real world is just to some degree a partial concretization of the stuff that exists down there in the unconscious, in the dream time, in the mythic territory. I don't think we understand that relationship well enough. I think that we have terrible and repressive forms of social magic foisted upon us to the denigration of all of us and we don't even know it's happening. I mean, what is the advertising industry for if not to shape and manipulate the dreamtime? I know this perhaps sounds a bit remote and mystical, but it seems to me that it does have nevertheless a very real influence upon our real lives, our real environment, and the real political situations that we live within.

FEATURE: How was *From Hell* an examination of this? How were the Whitechapel murders a mythic occurrence, how were they an historical occurrence, and how do you bring those two together?

MOORE: Well, with the Whitechapel murders, what you've basically got is within this very small area of east London, over a very short space of time, five women of no great significance were killed by a person or persons unknown. End of story, really. That is the reality of it. However, there is something different about Jack the Ripper. The Yorkshire Ripper, who was like Jack the Ripper, given a name by the tabloids, was made into a spectacular bogeyman that no doubt sold a lot more newspapers just as you had back in the original Ripper's day. When we caught him, we found out that he was just a guy with a dodgy beard, a bad haircut, *terrible* seventies dress sense. A little, insignificant guy. He was no Hannibal Lecter. He was not anybody who was *more* than human. He didn't have *more* than we had. This was somebody who had less than we had. This is somebody whose stairs didn't go quite all the way up to the attic. I guess that if we had ever found Jack the Ripper, we would have found out that he was some guy who'd got some sad psychological problem with his mother and who was probably at the end of the day more to be pitied than despised, and that would have been that. But that's not what happened. Through some fluke of history, Jack the Ripper evaded capture, evaded identification, and to some degree escaped *out* of history and *in* to myth. He crossed over. Not many people do that, but he did.

The reality of Jack the Ripper--and I say this despite the books that continue to come out with some new theory as to who he was--the reality of Jack the Ripper is that basically it's pointless trying to come up with an identity for this murderer who's been dead presumably for a hundred years. There's no point in that. The only thing that's worth investigating is the phenomenon of Jack the Ripper. Jack the Ripper escaped out of history to become something that had no limits. Not in the way that Peter Sutcliffe had limits. Peter Sutcliffe and the Moors murderers had a human dimension. We can judge these people as human beings. Jack the Ripper, by evading capture, by escaping from history has no human dimension. Jack the Ripper is a big black shape with a Gladstone bag and a top hat. He is a shadow on the wall. As such he has become a myth figure, a god, if you like. Something that really only has its existence in the mind and yet is a powerful and terrible god nonetheless. If you look at the way the Ripper echoes and re-echoes in our culture, I mean every psycho slasher film, every *Nightmare on Elm Street,* I think owes something to that primal figure hiding in the shadows with a sharp object. Jack the Ripper is to some degree the root source of all of our Hollywood slashers. It's also something which in the real world influences the minds, obviously, of a great many serial killers. I've researched a

large number of them and it's surprising how often the name Jack the Ripper turns up, almost as if he were a patron saint. As if he were a figure that were revered. Now, that's not because of how many people he killed, I mean he killed five people. You compare that to a Henry Lee Lucas and it just looks silly. However, Henry Lee Lucas will never be as big as Jack the Ripper. Jack the Ripper is the Elvis of death. With Henry Lee Lucas, he killed perhaps a couple of hundred people, which is *staggering, terrifying,* unbelievable, and yet we know what he looks like. This is a guy with a lousy eye and bad teeth. This is a guy who has a human dimension. He will never be that pure, nameless essence that committed the atrocities in Miller's Court.

To some degree the relationship between myth and history is a central part of *From Hell.* It's the core of it. It's the fact that, yeah, these events that I'm talking about are allegedly history, but they're clearly a part of this huge, powerful myth that has many ramifications. I mean in the work that I'm doing with Eddie right now, "The Dance of the Gull Catchers," which entirely involves itself not with Jack the Ripper, [but] with people who've written about him, there you can find how this mythical being has influenced the lives and destinies of everybody who's ever seemingly got involved with the case on any level. It all somehow gets tangled up and I think that the whole of *From Hell* is perhaps an attempt to map the very contours of Jack the Ripper the phenomenon; Jack the Ripper the mythic entity, because that is the reality of Jack the Ripper. It is pointless to try to pin it upon William Gull, Montague Druitt, or I think the latest theory is that it's an American who skipped the country shortly after the Marie Kelly murder. It's pointless. That is not the reality of Jack the Ripper. That is not his most important aspect, that is not the creature that haunts us. The creature that haunts us is the nameless thing, the thing that's just called Jack. Like I say, the whole of *From Hell* was an attempt to use actual history to chart and map the body of a myth. So I guess that's the relationship.

The Obelisk itself is solid, fixed and permanent in time.
About the stone pudenda of its base parade oblivious phantoms that I know to be the living, although not of any single night, or century.

FEATURE: A dominant theme in *From Hell* that seems to come up time and again is madness. What role do you think the idea of madness plays to your overall story?

MOORE: Well, the central madness in *From Hell* is Gull's. And yet, Gull's madness is linked overtly to the madness of people like William Blake, to the madness of visionary and mystical thinkers. Gull seems to suggest by what he's saying that he is quite aware that he's going mad, but that was what he wanted to do. He saw madness as a gateway to a different sort of consciousness. To a consciousness which he believed was perhaps closer to the gods. That sort of divine madness, if you will. I have no idea whether the real William Gull was of that opinion. I know that his last work seems centered upon the difference between the left and the right brain, which is why I make such a lot of the left and right brain and their relationship to each other, to the human condition, to consciousness, to the fact that we do have this rational left brain consciousness and we also have this irrational right brain consciousness which seems to be the basis for all of the stuff that finally percolates through to the left brain and which we make sense of. All thoughts that are put into words in the left brain have their origins in the dark, preverbal recesses of the right brain. To a degree, the right brain is where the gods live. I mean, it strikes me as mildly significant that in lots of cases of alleged mystical experiences, you'll find that there's evidence of some kind of temporal lobe seizure. That seems poignant to me, relevant.

I'm casting in the dark here, but whether things are diseases or illnesses or not seems to be a matter of fashion. I know that in the mid nineteenth century I think it was decided that homosexuality was an illness. Before that it had merely been a sin punishable by hanging or whatever, or a platonic friendship, but in the mid nineteenth century we decided it was an illness. If you were to take somebody like William Blake today and put him through some kind of psychiatric evaluation, you'd probably have to conclude that he was perhaps a schizophrenic. That would be the contemporary label that we'd stick upon him. In his own day, he was thought to be a little eccentric, shall we say. I mean, he was considered harmless enough, and people, I think, respected him. But certainly, he claimed to talk to angels, not everybody in his day did and I imagine he would have been thought a little odd. However, as his biographer, Alexander Gilchrist remarked, Blake was a kind of throwback to an earlier period where, as Gilchrist said, "the heavens were not so far off." If Blake had been born 200 years earlier, it would have probably been accepted that he was communicating with spirits, that they were talking through him, or they would have probably burned him at the stake, but they wouldn't have necessarily seen it as madness. Madness is a label for consciousness that is outside the parameters that we can understand. Now that's not to sort of follow the R.D. Laing path entirely and say that all

madness is in some way rational behavior that is simply a reaction to an irrational situation. I think that stuff like that tends to fall to bits as soon as you read any of the juicier chapters in Kraft-Ebbing, let alone some of the crime scene reports from the later serial killers. Some madness is just madness. At the same time it would seem that there are some forms of what you might call productive madness where people do seem to have broken through to what is certainly a different state, whether a higher or lower one perhaps remains to be seen, but a different state. It struck me that whoever committed the Ripper crimes must have been in some sort of unusual frame of mind, particularly the last one. To some degree, much of the work in the early book is trying to create a mindset where the scene in Miller's Court could be possible. To try and create a kind of mind, a philosophy that could have actually done that. Madness is important. It's a part of consciousness. It's past the parameters and fenceposts of consciousness, but that doesn't mean it isn't important.

Ha Ha Ha!
Her with her STARVATION, you with your PLAGUES an' Polly with her DEATH-THREATS,
We're the four Whores of the Apocalypse.

Some of the thinkers who progressed our world most intensely, who've pushed things on the furthest have had some very strange, if not actually mad beliefs. You have to look at Isaac Newton who unquestionably, prior to Einstein, lays all the foundation for modern science. Newton himself was an alchemist. But even if you wave that aside, it's undoubted that Newton's work could not have existed without the groundbreaking work in science that had been laid down by John Dee over a century before. John Dee, a renaissance man if ever I've heard of one, seems to have spent the last half of his life working on this *insane* series of tablets that he referred to as the angel language and which he believed was a means of directly communicating with something he referred to as angels. Now I don't know what to make of that, but it strikes me that, the cliché is that there is a very fine line between genius and insanity, often I don't think there's a line at all. I think it's purely in the eye of the beholder sometimes. It struck me that these extreme states of consciousness--whether they be divine, like Blake's, or quite hellish in some respects, like those that I've portrayed Gull as glimpsing--are worthy of attention by our part of this mysterious thing we have. This consciousness that we do not understand, even today with all of our work into artificial intelligence. It mainly seems to point out to us that we understand very little about quite natural intelligence. It's teaching us more about what we don't know about consciousness than it's teaching us about artificial intelligence.

FEATURE: What do you see as the major themes of *From Hell*?

MOORE: That's probably a tougher one than it sounds on the surface. Major themes? I guess a major theme would be the examination of history in a different light--history in an occult light, using the word "occult" in its purest sense, to mean hidden. By focusing upon one crime, by extension, it also suggests that we could look at any point in history and come up with something equally as surprising. That, yeah, you could measure a circle beginning anywhere. So, I suppose that if you call it a theme, one of the main intentions of *From Hell* at least is to illuminate a different possible way of looking at history.

Now in terms of the themes of the story, I suppose that the main theme is one of apotheosis: of men becoming as gods. It's something which I believe is present in a lot of serial killers, that when they commit these crimes that is the moment of their apotheosis. That is the moment that killed another human being and in their universe for a moment they are God. I think that there was probably an element of that in the Whitechapel murderer and in my portrayal of William Gull, I think that I writ that large.

I also think that notion of apotheosis can be extended to a broader social context. Gull is a product of his times. Gull wants to become as a god--to know what gods know--to become part of their great plan, just as the Dionysiac architects before him had seen themselves becoming immortal agents of God's purpose. Now, Gull is an outgrowth of the British Empire. The British Empire, it would seem to me, was in a similarly godstruck and deluded state. It was looking at its foreign policy in a state of dangerous pre-psychosis and yet believed itself to be reaching an absolute pinnacle of human experience. I suppose that one of the major themes of *From Hell* would be that: the dangers and rewards of apotheosis.

There are lots of other themes worked in there. There's certainly a lot of stuff about class. I mean, it's not something that you wanna hit people over the head with, but yeah, you do have the scenes contrasting Marie Nichols getting up in the morning and William Gull getting up in the morning. They're divided by a couple of miles in geographic space and by an entire world in terms of class. The fact that this could probably only have happened to people who were surplus to requirements, to an underclass. To this incredibly powerless underclass. I think that if there was another theme in the novel it would relate to that, politically. Over here, I forgot exactly how many years ago, Mrs. Thatcher, the leaderine, said part of her party's attempt to reinstall proper, decent, family values

over here--a similar sort of thing to the stuff that you'll get the Religious Right ranting about during the Reagan years over in America--she used the phrase that what she wanted to see was a return to Victorian values. Now, to some degree she's accomplished that [chuckles], but it wasn't quite the rosy, Charles Dickens picture that she was trying to paint. It wasn't *The Pickwick Papers*, it was more *Oliver Twist*. We've now got a society where you have got actual Victorian diseases like rickets and things starting to reemerge because the quality of health services have slipped to almost Victorian standards. You've got sort of, again, an underclass emerging that are completely vulnerable. The number of homeless kids who vanish in London every year, who knows where they go. The number of bodies that turn up in canals or by the side of railway tracks. It's a situation where in some respects, I think I pointed out in the appendix somewhere that it seemed to me upon researching it that you could make a good case for saying that the whole of the twentieth century grows out of the 1880s. In the 1880s, I think France invaded Indochina, which eventually was to lead to the Vietnam War. You've got the Mitchelson and Morley experiments which led to the dumping of the theory of the ether and led inexorably to Einstein's theories of relativity which led to the atomic bomb. You've got the machine gun invented in the 1880s; the motor car. Art was changing in the 1880s. Walter Sickert's new art school was very influential in changing the whole idea of art and changing the whole idea of culture at the same time. All of these things seemed to grow out of that period and I suppose that just as I'm choosing the 1880s to represent the Twentieth century, I'm choosing the Whitechapel murders to represent the 1880s. To some degree, I've tried to boil down our current situation into this small area of Whitechapel in the latter part of the Nineteenth century during one particularly bad autumn. So I suppose that would also count as a major theme. There came a point where there were so many themes and ideas running through it that I just had to sort of settle back and let them knit themselves into some sort of tapestry without worrying too much about how they resolved themselves.

FEATURE: Who are you now that you've finished *From Hell*. How are you different from the person who started the book eight years ago?

MOORE: Well, let me see. I am probably a much stranger individual than I was eight years ago [chuckles]. The main thing has been the interest in occultism that, like I say, grew out of *From Hell*, and that has been a major sea change. It has opened up different sorts of perceptions. I still have access to all my old perceptions, but I have a range of new ones now as well. Different ways of looking at things, different ideas, different systems in which to understand things. That sudden shift in perception has opened up a lot of doorways creatively. It's aroused my interest in a lot of areas that I hadn't really dealt with much before. I've produced a couple of CDs of spoken word material based upon one off performances. I was very pleased with them. They, I think, are work that I'm every bit as proud of as me best comics work, which is saying something.

There's also the novel, which to some degree grows out of a more magical perception of the world. I'm working on a CD at the moment which is sort of expanding on some similar concepts. My outlook, my world view, is suddenly different. It's expanded and I'm much happier with it. I certainly feel, insofar as I am able to judge, a lot more intelligent than I did going into the work eight years ago. I feel a lot less naive. I feel that I have broader perceptions. It's like, when I went into *Watchmen* with Dave Gibbons, we planned to do a good superhero book. The work itself changed our perceptions--changed our perceptions and, most importantly, changed the work. What came out on the other end was something which had expanded my view of the world. I'd written Dr. Manhattan, I'd seen things through Dr. Manhattan's eyes, I had a different view of things. That was true of *From Hell* as well. I went into it hoping to do a really interesting and detailed study of a murder. What came out at the other end was this study of myth, culture, history--huge, sprawling cosmic concepts. I had created William Gull and I'd seen through his eyes. And yeah, it's a different world.

I think all large works change you. They should. I mean any artist, if he or she is honest, designs his work or her work to affect a change in their audience. They know that won't often happen, but that's what they're trying to do. They're trying to change the perception of their audience. If they're doing that well enough, it probably goes without saying that they're going to change their own perception as well. They're the people who are working at the reactive core, they're the ones who are most exposed to the radiation of creativity. If they're gonna produce work that has enough energy to transform the readership, then it's probably gonna change them. I think I certainly realized within a couple months of finishing *Watchmen* and it's something which has been borne out by *From Hell*. Yes, I am in a very different space now. It probably wouldn't look like it to an outside viewer. They'd think, "Well, he was in Northampton when he started this book and now he's in Northampton but in a slightly different house that's just 150 yards around the corner from the other one." It wouldn't seem like a huge movement to anybody else, but the movement is internal. My perceptions, my thought processes are different, broader, and probably more complex than they were when I began the work.

It's a process that I'm very grateful for. To me it's the real hidden reward for doing this stuff. Yeah, the money's great. Yes, the critical reviews are great. And yes, the

pleasure of just purely doing the work itself is great. But it's what the work does to you that is the magical thing. It's not always necessarily a comfortable thing, but that is where the magic of fiction lies. Certainly it's something that I've experienced very intensely over the eight years of *From Hell.*

FEATURE: One of the things that you've mentioned several times in this interview among others is your interest in the occult which has developed over the course of *From Hell.* How does this knowledge and experience inform your work?

MOORE: Well, let me see. The reason I started to move into the occult, into an interest with it after I'd probably shied away from it for a great many years mainly because, I don't know, something to do with people who are into the occult. They're not the best advertisement for it, really, if you know what I mean.. New age practitioners and things like that don't really endear me to the idea of taking this stuff seriously. However, the way that I came into magic was by a different route. I came into it as an artist and, as an artist, I'd come up against a perimeter fence in my thinking about my own work. That perimeter fence was exactly the same one that some moron at a convention (it's probably the same guy at every convention) goes around asking every writer where he says, "Where do you get your ideas from?" And we always scoff at that question and belittle the person who's asked it whereas in fact it's probably the only question worth asking. Where do we get our ideas from? How do we get these rabbits out of this empty hat? An idea exists nowhere and then it exists in your mind and then it exists in a solid, three dimensional comic that people can buy at their newsstand. How does that happen? I know it's a commonplace experience. Everything physical around me now, around you now, came out of somebody's mind. The design of the phones that we're speaking on. This was a shape in someone's mind at some point and before that it was nothing. That process began to intrigue me. I started to feel that if I wanted to make progress as an artist, I had to cross over a boundary...of rationality, if you like. I had to move into a different sort of rationality. Now, the way that I chose to apply it was to make certain experiments, explorations of occult material, but with a creative end in mind.

I see magic and art as being inextricable. Magic is referred to as "The Art," and I think I understand why it is. I think that writing is *an* art, that painting is *an* art, that music is *an* art, that acting is *an* art, but magic is The Art. Magic is Art; all the other arts are subsumed in it. The whole process of creation is magical. I'm pretty sure that nine times out of ten that this is exactly what previous magicians have been talking about. But, it's never quite been understood. I mean, a *grimoire,* a book of spells, it's just a different way of saying "grammar." To cast a spell is to spell. To actually put words together is a magical act; to put lines together into a picture. It struck me that magic is the core of creation and with that premise I began a series of experiments and explorations. Now, one of the earliest of these was something where I suddenly decided in the first rush of this magical experience, it would be good to try and get it down in a creative form that could communicate it to other people. We decided to do this in a one off performance which we performed at the Bride Lane Theater in London and which was recorded on the first of our CDs which was, *The Moon and Serpent Grand Egyptian Theater of Marvels*, which I think is out on Cleopatra over in America. Now, that was a very intense experience. The audience certainly found it so and most of the people who listened to the CD seemed to find it so as well. It was certainly exciting enough for us to want to do a second one, so we did another performance, *The Birth Caul,* which we did in Newcastle a couple of years back. Again, the results were extraordinarily exciting at least to us.

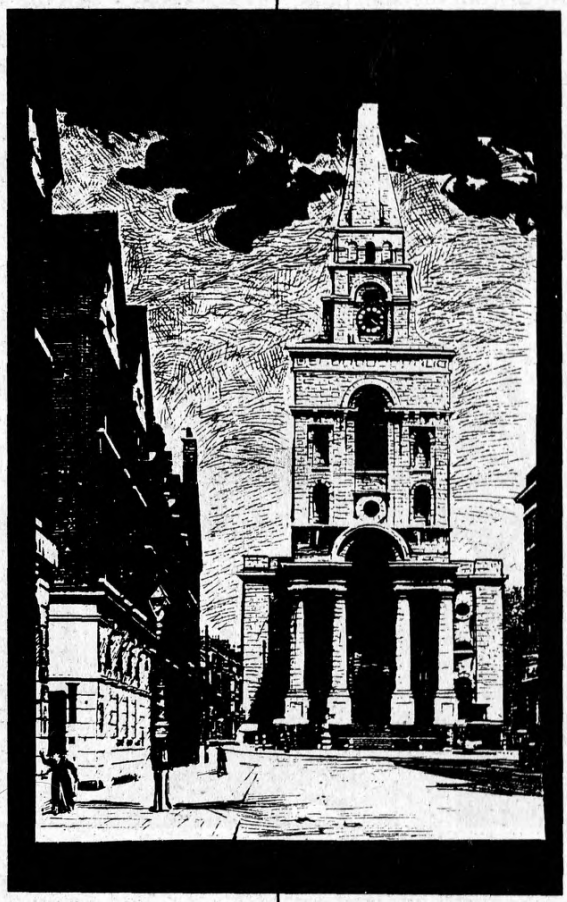
In terms of future comics work, in terms of the serious comics work, by which...all right, I'm doing various stuff for Image, for Extreme Studios, for WildStorm Studios which I'm having fun with and which I still think of as being very valid in their way. I'm trying to create an interesting realm of the imagination for teenage, adolescent, or even younger boys. And that seems valid. But, in terms of the serious work, the next serious comic work that I'll do after concluding *Lost Girls* will almost certainly be a history of magic. It's probably not going to be as dry as it sounds. Like, *From Hell* was a history of the Jack the Ripper murder and in that same sense, I'm going to be doing a history of magic. I'm not sure yet about artists or any other details, but it's something that I want to explore.

At the same time, I suppose what it means is that I see all work as being magical. Now I respect the processes by which I arrive at an idea much more deeply than I did before. I have a much richer relationship with my own work, with my own mind, and with the world. That's been the main influence of this stuff.

It's also provided a great deal of incidental inspiration. I mean the next CD that I'm going to be doing has a working title of *The Disco Qabalah.* We're going to be doing a trance dance album. It'll probably be a double album, two and a quarter albums of music all told, that is techno dance music that is based upon the Jewish mystical system of the Qabalah, which I've just read to my horror has suddenly become popular in America amongst people like Roseanne Barr.

FEATURE: Oh God!

MOORE: Yeah, that's what I thought. She made a thoughtful statement to the press where she said, "Yeah, the Qabalah's great, it's all linked up with like Atlantis and flying saucers and things that we believed when we were hippies." So I hope that's died down by the time we finally get this CD released so we don't need to suffer guilt by association. That's the kind of thinking behind the new novel that I'm planning, which is called *A Grammar*. The novel is certainly very much based upon the relationship between fiction, fantasy, magic, reality, history--all my usual concerns but taken a bit further. So, it's something I don't know if in five years times I'll have found some other passion, but at the moment this feels like the big one. It feels like something which has got enough potential energy in it for me to work and mine, probably for the rest of me life, without getting boring.



FEATURE: In this recent correspondence with Dave Sim you write, "Despite my abiding love of the medium," that is, comics, "it is not my *only* interest or indeed even my *major* interest at the moment." So, what would you classify as your major interest? Would it be this exploration of magic?

MOORE: Yes it would be, with the understanding that I now see the rest of my other work as being subsumed within magic. But yeah, I would say that is my major interest. It varies from day to day, but at the moment I'm really looking forward to getting some time so that I don't have to do comics for a few months and so that I can press on for the next novel. I'm really looking forward to the time in the studio. This is probably a sort of a passing infatuation, and comics are always there.

Whereas before, perhaps I saw myself as a zealous champion of the comics medium prior to the middle eighties, my attitude has changed since the middle eighties. Back in the middle eighties I think that I had a belief along with a lot of other people that what we should be trying to do is get comics to a point where they were acceptable to a mass culture. That if people could just see what comics were capable of, then comics could finally take their place in culture along with everything else. And yeah, that happened, our dreams came true and we hadn't considered just what that would mean. We hadn't really considered just how dreadful mass culture was. That it wasn't necessarily anything that we should be aiming at acceptance from. I think that the late eighties and early nineties have demonstrated that. I mean, yeah, we've become as acceptable as any other form of pop culture, we've become as disposable as any other form of pop culture. I think that dream that fueled a lot of the illusion of a comics renaissance in the middle eighties has become a fairly bankrupt one. I think that might very well be the reason why so many comics these days, even the very good ones, even the better ones, perhaps slightly have the feel to them that someone's left the top off of a soda bottle. Some of the effervescence is gone, some of that drive towards a perceived golden age in the future has gone. We have this miniature golden age in the middle eighties and it tarnished very, very quickly. It was probably too small a dream to begin with and probably wasn't what we should have been aiming at. But now that it's gone, I think that a lot of people don't really have a sense of direction. I think that comics needs to find a new vision.

For my part, I believe that it should get back to the old vision of just simply doing the best work possible for the love of comics rather than as part of any agenda to promote comics, to make comics successful. I think in twentieth century, western terms, success is a dodgy proposition. We perhaps should have thought about that more before we went in search of it. But we probably learned our lesson now. I hope that in comics we can get a return to simple, coherent, and competent story values. That people can stop trying to be hip and try to do good comics instead. Without any thought of social reward. That would please me.

My own role has changed slightly. I've got no desire to be any sort of figurehead for comics. I have no desire to be hip in comics. I have no desire to really be part of the comics industry. I have a great interest in the medium, I will continue to work in it while I have material that is appropriate to comics. It's just that at the moment, that's sharing time with material that is obviously more appropriate to other media. Comics are always gonna have a massive place in my heart and I shall probably always be working in them. But at the same time, I've been doing this for fifteen, nearly twenty years now. I did feel the need to keep myself fresh by branching out into other areas and I'm learning an awful lot. Just as the sensibilities that I brought to comics in the first place had grown out of my interest in poetry as a teenager, in drama, in performance, then at the moment by working in music, in the CD-ROM I'm planning with Dave Gibbons, in all of these other areas, I am learning things which I'm sure will eventually percolate through to my comics writing. They're all happening to the same individual, everything tends to influence everything else. I'm sure that my comics writing has influenced my prose writing to a certain degree and I'm sure that soon that will be the same the other way. It's not so much a shift from one state to another, it's

more just a fluctuation of a kind of matrix. So yeah, comics are always going to be a part of that matrix.

FEATURE: How did you find yourself exploring these worlds outside of comics? How did you "break out of comics," to borrow Valentino's phrase?

MOORE: [Laughs] How do you break out of comics? Well, to some degree it's a difficult process. I suppose [by] mentally distancing meself from them. As soon as I'd stopped doing mainstream superhero books I still had a large audience. I mean, *Big Numbers* sold very well, the first couple of issues, for a black and white, non-superhero book. When that fell through and the other work was well away from the superhero mainstream, I found that a large chunk of the audience pretty well forget about you overnight. A large chunk of the audience weren't really interested in Alan Moore, they were interested in Alan Moore doing superhero comics. You still get letters like that in the fan press. You can tell that what everybody wants is *Watchmen II*. They know there's never gonna be one, but they still want it. So, by refusing to pander to that and also by stepping down, by refusing to take on the role of celebrity spokesman I think that was another big severing between me and comics. I didn't like the attention that I was getting at conventions, I didn't like conventions [chuckles], so I stopped going to them. I stopped really taking a part in the fan press to the degree that I had been before. I stopped reading the fan press. Since I don't leave Northampton very often [and] we only have one comic shop which doesn't have a terribly wide range of comics, I see less and less comics. I still keep up on the ones that I like, but not all of them, they don't just come here. So I'm sure there's lots of great stuff that I'm missing. There are a few people, old friends from the industry, that I am in touch with fairly regularly. There are a few others that I see much less often, but where there's still a real spark between us, but by and large I've retreated from that kind of prominence, as a conscious decision. I didn't like it, I didn't enjoy it, it's not what I wanted when I went into comics. All I really wanted when I got into comics was a chance to do decent comics the way I felt they should be done. Having this sort of figurehead status foisted upon me was something that I wasn't prepared to accept. That stuff's not my job, that's not what I find important. So, I'd say that inclinations in that direction have gradually increased and sort of snowballed to the point where now, like, I'll get issues of *Wizard* through the post occasionally and stuff like that. I don't read them and if I can't find anyone to give them to they're thrown out. That's no disrespect to *Wizard,* I'm sure it's perfectly fine for the readership that it's aimed at, but I'm not part of that readership--I never have been, I don't think, and I'm certainly not now.

So there is a general sense of distance that puts comics into a different perspective. They're no longer looming so massively in the foreground of my mind as they once were. They're now another big object in a landscape that has several big objects in it. It's sort of moved away and my perspective has grown broader. Comics are part of what I do and will always be part of what I do, but like I say, the perspective's broader now and there are other things in the picture.

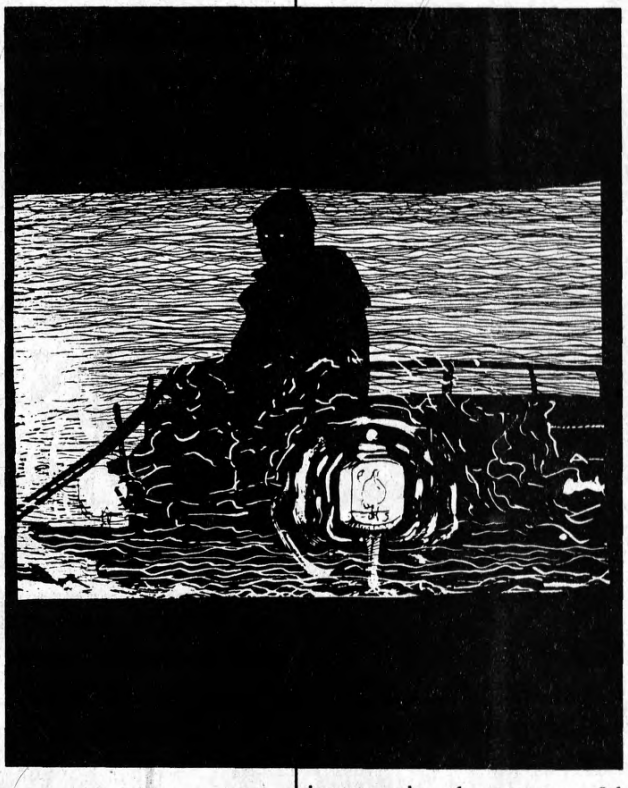
FEATURE: Tell me about some of the other big things in the picture. Tell me about your prose work and your CD work--what are you exploring with them and how are they being made available?

MOORE: Well, let's see, the first of the prose work, *The Voice of the Fire,* has just been published by Gollancz Books over here. I think copies are available in America, but you probably have to hunt for them. That was a book that took me five years and as I was saying earlier, it revolves around the idea of psychogeography. I can take my home town (which is to say Northampton), these mundane streets that I see every day of my life, and actually investigate them: find out the historical depths that inform these places. Northampton is a settlement that goes back as far as Neolithic times. We've had an awful lot of history here. [So,] to try and excavate all of that and work that into a series of fictions that expand from the Neolithic period right up to the last chapter which is narrated by myself, living in Northampton in the present day, to get a sense of what a town *is.* Something that can't be conveyed by a simple documentary or snapshot or whatever, but something that shows the depth of meaning and myth and history that informs every place in which we live. That was the basis of *Voice of the Fire.*

The next work that I've got in the early planning stages is this thing called *A Grammar*, which will probably also be published by Gollancz. That will have similar aspects to it in that there will be a geographical element to the book. We'll be following a sheep track between Northampton and Wales. It's a drover's track that existed probably since the Bronze Age and it crosses through a lot of fascinating territory: Shakespeare Country; Elgar Country; the territories of Pender, the last pagan king of Britain; Alfred Watkins, the ley-line visionary. There's a straight line between Northampton and Wales that travels between the mythical territories, the visionary territories of all these people. So the

book will have certain aspects of it which are cutting a path through geography, through history, and further into the territories of vision and myth. There's a lot more to it than that, but I've not started writing it yet so I don't want to give too much away.

Regarding the CDs, I'm working on these with two musicians who are friends of mine and who also have occult leanings. This is Tim Perkins, who's an excellent local composer. I believe he's done some session work with the band Marillion. David Jay, who's my other collaborator, started out with Bauhaus and now is part of Love and Rockets. We collaborate together, various other people are dragged in as required. The first two CDs are spoken word CDs. Both of them are an hour long, they are both derived from separate rituals that we did. To some degree this is part of the process; the inspiration for these things sometimes arrive purely from some sort of irrational, ritual working which we then follow as if it were divine instruction. As long as the end work is good, is better than we could have accomplished by other means, it doesn't matter whether the gods are there or not, really. That's not tremendously important. As long as it works. So, we've got these first two spoken word albums and the third one isn't going to be spoken word. Like I say, it's an album of dance music where for the first time I'm having to function as a musician even though I can't play a note on a single instrument, but luckily with dance music that doesn't seem to matter too much. It's a different experience. To compose dance music is more like painting--you tend to talk to the engineer in the studio in a kind of synaesthetic language where you're describing sounds in visual terms. You're saying, "Give me eight minutes of something that sounds like vaporized gold." After switching back and forth for a little while you'll come up with some approximation of the sound you have in your head. Composing is very different in the late twentieth century, it's become a much more democratic proposition, so I enjoy doing that.



The other project that's planned at the moment is [between] me and Dave Gibbons. We're planning to work on a CD ROM, which I can't say too much about. It's a very big project. We're only in the planning stages at the moment, but we think that we've basically come up with a few aspects of the CD ROM virtual experience that people haven't really thought about or explored too deeply as yet. We think that we have some insights into that world that we can maybe exploit to unusual effect and advantage. So that's something that we shall be exploring, and unsurprisingly, yeah, the CD ROM is an outgrowth of the more occult concepts that have been passing through my mind of late.

On top of that I'm due to go up to London later this month with Iain Sinclair. We're going to be visiting a site in London, Doctor Dee's House at Mortlake, and from this I shall produce a page of text and some sort of piece of art, I don't know what yet, maybe a piece of found art, and this will be part of an exhibition that's gonna be held at a gallery in London, the Jago Gallery in Shoreditch . It's things like that: small events, performance events, these are things that I enjoy doing. I've even done a little bit of drawing recently. I did a cover for a novel, a CD cover. I'm not saying these were great art, but they were great fun to do. They're my first color work in, well probably my first color work full stop. My general feeling at the moment is one of rich possibility. A lot of different potentials are open. I'm finding myself in such a rich landscape, the biggest decision is deciding what I want to do most because there are so many tempting propositions. But I think that the things I've listed are probably what are going to be preoccupying me over the next two years at least.

FEATURE: Where do you see yourself moving as an artist? What sort of legacy are you trying to build, what kind of body of work are you trying to create?

MOORE: I've never really thought much of a legacy. I suppose that I don't know, I'm just trusting the process. I look back at the early work that I did. I look at *Watchmen*, and I must admit I feel a certain amount of unworthy embarrassment. It's nothing that I should feel, but just the fact that it was a superhero comic. I was trying to say something serious in a fairly lightweight form. Like I say, I wouldn't do that now. I'm still very proud of *Watchmen*, but I'm prouder of stuff outside that genre like *From Hell,* like *Lost Girls.* There's a progression going on here. It's only a progression of ideas in my head, but they're following a kind of path. I'm on the path, I don't know where it's going, and I don't really have a destination in mind. There's no plan here, there's just a path which I am trying to uncover and interpret as I go along. My works are, I suppose, a series of communiqués from along the trail. My works will tell you more or less where I am at any given point along that trail. What lies further down the road...I mean, my list of things that I'm gonna be doing in the future, I suppose should be considered directions that look to me promising to head out in. I don't know what I'll find when I get there, and I don't know what path will lead from there. I don't know where I'll be going after that.

I have my own sort of preoccupations, they tend to veer towards getting further in to something. When dealing with mainstream comics, I'd perhaps try and look at the politics or the morals that informed the other situations in these books, trying to get under the surface of that. When I'd explored that for a bit, I'd try to get under the surface a bit further still. To talk about politics in a more general sense and just relating them to a funny book world. There's a point where you want to go further still. It's a sort of burrowing, I suppose. That's the best way that I can describe the process. I want to try and penetrate the different layers of meaning that there are in the world as deeply as possible. Whatever tools or whatever avenues seem to be most productive towards that end are the ones that I shall be taking. But this is a very subjective thing. It's a totally unpredictable process inside my head. I shall just have to see where it takes me. I try not to second guess that sort of stuff.

I guess when I finally drop dead over the typewriter, then, and only then, I'll be able to see what body of work I've left behind. I'm sure that eighty percent of it will be crap, but there'll probably be a couple of good things in there that will endure and they'll probably be the last things that I ever thought they'd be.

WHAT ARE YOU HUNTING, ALAN?
RIVER DEMONS, RICK. SHH. THERE'S ONE NOW!
LOOKS TO BE THE BIGGEST ONE I'VE EVER SEEN!
GOT HIM!
NOW, DON'T FREAK OUT ON ME! THE VISUAL DISPLAY IS JUST ITS NATURAL DEFENSE! AS LONG AS I HOLD HIM TIGHTLY, HE'S QUITE HARMLESS.
GOD--IT'S EXQUISITE!
SO IT IS, RICK. SO IT IS. BUT THE BEST PART'S THE MYSTIC CIGARETTES IT GROWS IN ITS BELLY...
YOU PEEL THE SKIN BACK LIKE SO AND... THERE!
TRY ONE, RICK! THEY'LL KNOCK YOU ON YOUR ASS!

PETER BAGGE

Peter Bagge's career is one of the most distinguished among alternative cartoonists. At the start of the eighties, Bagge's work appeared in various New York weeklies, while with John Holmstrom he published **Comical Funnies.** ***In this time he was also a frequent contributor to R. Crumb's*** **Weirdo,** ***the editing of which he eventually took over. While working on*** **Weirdo,** ***Bagge began working on his solo anthology*** **Neat Stuff,** ***where he developed the blackly humorous, cartoony style of art and storytelling his is most well known for.***

In the early 1990s Bagge abandoned **Neat Stuff** ***and began*** **Hate,** ***the title he is currently working on.*** **Hate** ***has become a critical and commercial success, being one of the first alternative comics to move to color while retaining the integrity of its storytelling.***

Feature ***editor and publisher Charles Brownstein caught up with Bagge over the phone recently to discuss his early work, thoughts on the business, and future as an artist.***

FEATURE: Let's talk about your roots. How did you become interested in comics?

PETER BAGGE: Well, I can't remember back that far, I'm afraid [laughs]. As a kid I was always drawn to both comic art and animated TV shows, I guess like all kids are. In particular, I always liked funny and or satirical work. So my favorite stuff growing up would be *Mad Magazine*, *Peanuts*--this would be back in the sixties. Charles Schulz was doing brilliant work back then. Even when I look back on it now, it's pretty amazing what he did in the sixties. I liked a lot of the more humorous daily strips. I was also a very big fan of Warner Brothers cartoons, in particular Bob Clampett and Tex Avery cartoons, people like that. Those were my first, earliest inspirations.

FEATURE: Were comics something you'd intended to do as a career, or were they something you'd fallen into?

BAGGE: Comic books I didn't think too much about. I liked *Mad Magazine* and fantasized about being a staffer there. It never dawned on me that I could make something like *Mad Magazine* on my own. Although I wound up contributing to them, I was never too much of a fan of *Mad*'s imitators like *Cracked*. Even as a kid, they seemed pretty lame to me. I think I thought more when I was a kid about being a syndicated daily cartoonist. The thing is, as I got older, I was less and less taken with that idea. What ideas appealed to me that I would think of as I entered high school seemed less and less suitable to what you could do in a daily strip and at the same time it seemed like the daily strips themselves were becoming less and less inspired. As the years went by, all through the seventies, all through my high school years, the daily strips seemed less and less an appealing way to go and I just couldn't see myself boxing myself in and working in that kind of format.

So I almost completely gave up the notion of being a cartoonist at all. I just didn't see what I could do or how I could fit in. The only thing I could think of in the seventies that I found inspiring at all was *National Lampoon*. I thought the comics in *National Lampoon* were just hilarious, but for the most part they were one page or at most three page things. But that all changed when I started to go to art school and was able to see in its original form Robert Crumb's and other underground cartoonists' comix. When I saw underground comix and saw that you could do whatever you wanted to do from cover to cover and have complete creative control over the comic book, that was quite an eye opener. Almost instantly when I saw that, I knew that was exactly what I wanted to do.

FEATURE: What goals did you have when you went to the School of Visual Arts in New York. You said you weren't thinking of being a cartoonist. What were you thinking of being?

BAGGE: I was thinking of getting out of my home town where I was going nowhere real fast. I was a terrible student. I came from kind of a screwy family where my parents became pretty bad alcoholics and seemed to expect less and less of me so as a result I delivered less and less. I was just a real good for nothing by the time I got out of high school. I just knew I had to do something or just wind up a complete wastrel. So I finally found an art school that would accept me, which was SVA. I even got turned down by other art schools because my grades were so low. SVA, I guess, would accept a turtle if it could make tuition [laughs]. At least that's my impression of the place.

I hadn't been focusing much energy or attention on my art either. I wasn't really trying that much and I wasn't doing very much comics. If I would draw it was just simple drawing. Just to keep myself amused I would do some life drawing and that was about it. I was hardly ever trying to do comics. So while I was in art school, everything I was doing was mainly by default. I had planned on eventually taking some of the cartooning courses that they had there and at the

time, I didn't even know who the teachers were. It was Eisner, Kurtzman, and speigelman, but at the time I started SVA I never heard of any of them, didn't know who they were. I found out later much to my shock and surprise who they all were and what they'd done. And speigelman, even though I never took his course, I got to know him a bit personally and got a lot of information out of him just from knowing him personally. I just simply became an illustration major and just took this course and that course and kind of coasted.

In my home town underground comics were unavailable, but in New York City they were, so once I started buying them that got me drawing again and thinking about maybe working my way up to eventually doing my own comic book. So, after one year of SVA, I quit for two reasons. One, I ran out of money [laughs] and two, I was so clear in my mind by that point what I wanted to do with my art, that I felt I was better off quitting the school so I didn't need to take a bunch of courses in things that I flat out was not interested in anymore. I just simply made a pest of myself by introducing myself to cartoonists who were doing things that I thought were interesting in the New York area. Like one person was John Holmstrom, who had a magazine called *Punk Magazine*. I loved his magazine, and he was a cartoonist and other cartoonists contributed to the magazine and I really shared their sensibility. Also, like I said, I met art spiegelman and there were a lot of other cartoonists who were still in speigelman's class like Kaz, Drew Friedman, Mark Newgarden. I got to know them and just gleaned all the practical information from them and became caught up on the history of comics and basically taught myself everything that I needed to know.

FEATURE: After SVA, you went on to co-publish *Comical Funnies* with John Holmstrom. Tell me about your relationship with Holmstrom and how he came to impact your work.

BAGGE: Well, I was taken with him and influenced by him for the same reason I was so drawn to, and at the same time influenced by, *Punk Magazine*. There was a certain aspect of the Punk philosophy that at the time (the late seventies, early eighties) I found very refreshing. Needless to say they were very un-politically correct and they were very up front about what they liked and didn't like. They didn't try to intellectualize any lowbrow thing that they were interested in as a way of excusing themselves for say, liking, not just Punk, but for liking macaroni and cheese. They'd just say, "I like macaroni and cheese." Period. End of discussion. They were very blunt.

I realize too that why it was so appealing to me had a lot to do with what it was like to be an art student in New York City in the late seventies where the exact opposite tended to rule the day. Everybody was over-intellectualizing. [Punk] was an escape from artsy-fartsyness and pretentiousness that I pretty much felt I was drowning in. I was very uncomfortable being a part of the fine art world, and when people talk about the politics, I wasn't in lock step with what was the accepted political view on just about everything. I didn't march to the tune that the Village Voice was setting, which didn't mean that I was at the exact opposite pole of them at all. It's just funny how people move to New York City to get away from the world of mainstream America, but once they gather in a place like New York City and you have all these outcasts, and misfits, and artists, and communists, and homosexuals, all gathered together presumably to be themselves and think for themselves, all of a sudden you find the same group of people setting down their own rules of what's accepted and not accepted, which was driving me nuts. I wasn't even comfortable in expressing my criticism. I would have to mumble it, if you know what I mean, whereas Holmstrom and *Punk Magazine* was not at all afraid to make fun of it and just blurt out whatever was on his mind. I just found that very refreshing.

FEATURE: How much were you a part of the New York underground art scene?

BAGGE: I wasn't completely involved in either an art scene, because I never was a, quote unquote, fine artist. The only time I ever had drawings or paintings hanging on a gallery wall in New York was when me and two other cartoonists: Kaz and Ken Weiner, had something called the Ugly Art Show where we just painted ugly paintings of ugly people and convinced some poor slob of a gallery owner to hang it. We had a crazy party and would make little stickers of these characters and stick them all over the place. To a large degree, the reason we got such a big kick out of that is because it was a satire of the fine art world, we were making fun of the fine art world. Other than that, my wife was a fine art major, I had other friends who were fine artists, so I would go to galleries. I was familiar with it, I had friends in that world, but I wasn't taken with it. I wasn't impressed with it at all and hated 99% of the stuff I saw hanging on the walls. I would say I was repulsed by that world [chuckles] and still am.

At the same time, while I liked the Punk Rock and New Wave music that was coming out at the time, it was certainly a hell of a lot more interesting than mainstream pop music. I also was never a big club goer. I wasn't like a regular at CBGB's and all these other clubs. I would go to them occasionally and almost all of my friends were *totally* into going to Punk Rock shows. They'd be going out every night to shows, but usually I'd have to be dragged and that's quite simply because I just don't enjoy that environment. I don't like staying up really late, standing on my feet until one in the morning, until the main act would come out, inhaling other people's cigarette smoke, and the music being so loud I

can't talk. That's not my idea of fun. So, I liked the records, I was into Punk Rock, but I liked listening to it at home on my record player and not going out and hearing the real thing.

FEATURE: What sorts of things were you doing at the time?

BAGGE: A little bit of everything. I'd go out and do stuff. I never turned down an invitation to a party, regardless of who was there and my wife and I hosted tons of parties. I started drawing all the time when I wasn't at my lousy day job. I'd be drawing every spare moment I had trying to make something of this cartooning bug that I had got going. I talked and socialized and compared notes with other cartoonists. I was getting to know more and more cartoonists all the time and thanks to magazines like *Raw* and *Weirdo,* there was a renewed interest in underground and alternative comics. There was like this second wave of the underground movement and Fantagraphics started publishing stuff like *Love and Rockets*. So all of a sudden it looked like the skies were starting to clear again. In the late seventies people were telling me, "Forget about the idea of being an underground cartoonist, undergrounds are dead. No one's making any money at it, the only people those guy's will publish are Crumb or Shelton, so just forget it." But apparently there were an awful lot of cartoonists who felt like me. They were completely inspired by underground comix for the same reason I was. They were cartoonists from everywhere, not just New York who were doing all kinds of weird, unique things. So there was a lot to be excited about and to talk about.

FEATURE: Who were some of these cartoonists you were meeting in New York and how did they influence the work you were doing?

BAGGE: Well, my first and tightest group of friends would include Holmstrom, another guy named JD King, who is now an illustrator, another cartoonist named Ken Weiner who ten or so years ago moved to Minneapolis and now occasionally does illustrations but doesn't really do comics. Then there was another guy, a very talented artist named Bruce Carlton who was *Punk Magazine's* art director and then, when *Punk* folded, he became *Screw Magazine's* art director. Then around the time I moved to Seattle in about '84, he moved to Indonesia. He had a real thing for Southeast Asian women [laughs]. Since he's been there he basically stopped drawing. Other than that, cartoonists I would see and talked to a lot would be Kaz, we both lived in Hoboken around '82, '83, into '84. Because we were in the same town I saw him all the time in those days. Drew Friedman, Mark Newgarden. There were other people who would probably be lesser knowns: Milton Knight, Seth Tobocman who does *World War 3 Illustrated.*. There were a lot of people who I simply hung out with a lot, but I'd be following the work of everybody. I'd be following the work of Charles Burns and Gary Panter, people like that.

FEATURE: How was your work affected by hanging out and talking shop with these different cartoonists?

BAGGE: Mainly, what I would hear from a lot of cartoonists--well, let me put it this way, I was always and still am a very compulsive cartoonist. I have a lot of ideas, a lot of story ideas that needed to get down on paper. I realize, if anything, I've noticed that this is the exact opposite problem that most cartoonists have where the hardest part is struggling to come up with an idea that's worth putting down on paper. I guess I'm an egomaniac where I think if an idea comes into my head it needs to be put down and published. So as a result I tended to work too quick and I still have a tendency to do that, especially when it comes to inking. I'm very deliberate when it comes to honing the idea, writing it, getting it all down, and even pencilling it, but by the time I'm ready to do the final rendering of it, the inking of it, I'm so eager to get it done that I tend to rush it. Part of it is simply because, unlike a lot of cartoonists, I don't particularly enjoy inking. It's not a big deal to me that I master the brush or the pen and put down the perfect line. I'm not very anal in that regard. I just flat out do not enjoy drawing [laughs]. I want it to come out looking good, so I struggle with it because I want the strip to look good, but I don't enjoy the simple act of rendering the finished page. I tend to be sloppy and impatient and in the old days, in the eighties, this tended to really show through. I heard, "You have a nice funny drawing style, you're a funny guy, you have a lot of good ideas, but you're a very sloppy inker. You work way too fast, you've gotta slow down." That was basically advice that I would hear over and over and over again from everybody, and of course I had to take it to heart. I figured, "Gosh, everyone wouldn't be telling me this if it wasn't true." So that was the one thing that I had to learn how to do and that I was encouraged to do most, to just slow down and try to make my finished pages look more polished.

Other than that, when it came to ideas a big thing in those days...well it really depended. Here there was a conflict. [That intro to this paragraph could use some rephrasing] The *Punk Magazine* guys, Holmstrom and them were real traditionalists. They were anti-intellectual, anti-pretensions. They approached comics in a very traditional way where you just tell a joke and to dig deeper or to experiment or to be more personal tended to put them off. Whereas, guys like Kaz and a lot of the people who were much more closely aligned to art spiegelman, to them experimentation was like a *mantra.* If you do something differently or approach it differently, do something that's never been done before, that in and of itself was the greatest,

highest achievement, which to me was equally absurd. I mean, it's great when somebody does something in an approach or a way that's never been done before. It's great if someone does something that's completely original, but there has to be a point to it. It has to serve some purpose. It's gotta have a good story or a good idea behind it. Simply doing something seemed to me to be kind of absurd and they seemed to me to be tripping all over themselves a little too much to be weird, and different, and quote unquote, experimental. So I tried to find a balance between the two.

I agreed with both of them. I like to communicate clearly and directly and I see no point in deconstructing the comics form and all that hoo hah stuff if there's no rhyme or reason to it other than just to be different, but at the same time, I did want to push myself in my own way. It took me a while to find my own voice. I would say I didn't find it until half way through *Neat Stuff*, but it took me a while to figure out exactly what kinds of stories I wanted to tell and how I wanted to tell them. Which, as it turned out would describe what I wound up doing and what I still do as basically autobiographical stories, but told in a very cartoony, traditional comic book way.

FEATURE: Earlier in the interview you mentioned that books like *Raw* and *Weirdo* were sparking a second wave of underground material. How did you become with Crumb and start working with him on *Weirdo?*

BAGGE: Well, almost from the instant I saw *Weirdo* and I saw that Robert Crumb put his address in there and said he was open to looking at other artist's work, I immediately jumped on that opportunity to send him copies of *Comical Funnies*, and everything else I self published, Xeroxes of other strips I'd done. One, just for the excitement of being in some kind of contact with him and getting some kind of feedback from him, and also two, to hopefully appear in *Weirdo* because I liked *Weirdo* a lot and Robert Crumb is just simply my favorite artist that ever lived. Right from the start he always wrote back to me, always wrote, really nice encouraging letters.

At first when I would submit my work for him to reprint, at first he would reject it on a regular basis, but when he'd reject it, he'd always give me a very good reason why and give me some good advice that I tried to use and build on. Eventually by 1982, 1983 he started printing my work in *Weirdo.* Meanwhile, I wasn't doing *Comical Funnies* anymore, I wanted to get involved in an anthology of my own and work with friends on something like that. I started casting about for a publisher. I asked Robert Crumb for advice and he wrote back and said, "Well if you're interested in editing your own anthology like *Weirdo,* how would you like to edit *Weirdo*?" He was getting burned out on the managing editor role of the magazine and told me that I could do it for him and I said, "Yeah, sure." I thought it was a golden opportunity I couldn't pass up on. In a lot of ways, and he warned me too, it was kind of a booby prize. The pay was terrible. There was a lot of heavy, even bad karma associated with the magazine just because it was started by Crumb who generates a lot of weird, heavy, and even bad karma wherever he goes [laughs]. The nature of the magazine and the type of artists...it attracted weirdoes because it was called *Weirdo Magazine,* so it was pretty tricky dealing with all these eccentrics who wanted to be in the magazine.

Crumb himself is fantastic, I always have to add that. Contrary to what a lot of people seem to think or presume, he was extremely loyal, very helpful. I never worked for a more consistent and more dependable person. In all my comic career, I never had a more reliable guy than him.

FEATURE: What was it like for you to edit *Weirdo* and pursue your own work? Did it get to a point where the responsibilities of *Weirdo* precluded the ability for you to experiment artistically?

BAGGE: Actually, *Weirdo* was the perfect place to experiment, which is what I used it for not just with my vision of the magazine, but also with my own work. In fact, I made a conscious effort to do something completely different every time I did do a story of my own for *Weirdo.* The problem was that the magazine didn't pay nearly enough for me to make a living on and also by this time, 1984, I moved with my wife to Seattle, where she started her own business, but unlike New York, there was just no freelance work to be had here in Seattle. So the only way I could see myself filling up my time and doing comics and drawing full time was if I had my own comic book entirely.

Now meanwhile, before I moved to Seattle, I had once briefly met Gary Groth and Kim Thompson of Fantagraphics. When I was in New York, they were in Connecticut, so since they were within driving distance, I went and visited them They told me that they liked my work a lot which was not what I was asking for. Gary Groth said, "How would you like to have your own comic book?" Which sounded perfect to me, but I thought he was just talking through his hat, I didn't know he was serious. Meanwhile, I moved to Seattle and was getting settled there, and Fantagraphics moved to Los Angeles. So, once I got settled and they got settled and once I saw I wasn't gonna get any commercial work at all in Seattle, out of desperation I called up Gary Groth and said, "Gary, were you serious about that idea of me doing my own comic?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Are you still up for it?" He said, "Yeah." So that's how *Neat Stuff* was born.

WHO ARE YOU CALLIN' GRUESOME, GRUESOME?!
..HEH HEH HEH...
OH BROTHER...
KEEP YER SHIRT ON, KID. I WAS JUST TEASIN' YA...
BESIDES, IT WOULDN'T BE WISE FOR A PUNK LIKE YOU TO TANGLE WITH A GUY WHO FOUGHT IN 'NAM...
OH WOW, YOU WERE IN 'NAM?! I'M SHAKIN' ALL OVER!!
4-F
SO, YOU'RE A TOUGH GUY, HUH? I DOUBT YOU'D LAST FIVE MINUTES IN THAT JUNGLE!
A MAN WHO'S SURVIVED THAT CAN SURVIVE ANYTHING!
IS THAT SO? THEN HOW COME SO MANY OF YOU LOSERS LIVE ON THE STREET?
UH, BUDDY, IT'S YOUR TURN...
"LOSERS"? ARE YOU INSINUATING THAT WE LOST THAT WAR?!
I DON'T HAVE TO INSINUATE ANYTHING, SINCE IT'S AN ESTABLISHED FACT...
THAT DOES IT! IT'S TIME SOMEONE TAUGHT YOU A HISTORY LESSON, PAL...
HEY, GET YOUR GRUBBY PAWS OFFA ME, PAL!...
CLUTCH!
GET A LOAD OF THOSE TWO, FLEXING THEIR MUSCLES FOR THE LADIES...
I NEVER UNDERSTOOD WHY THEY ALLOWED MEN IN POOL HALLS IN THE FIRST PLACE!
HA!
AAAH, LUCKY FOR YOU I DON'T FEEL LIKE DOING MURDER TODAY...
ARRRGH... IS IT STILL MY TURN?
YES.
UMPH!
SQUACK!
BLOOP!
THAT DOES IT! I QUIT THIS STUPID GIRL'S GAME!
AWW, AND JUST WHEN YOU WERE GETTING GOOD AT IT, TOO.

That was when the strain really started to take hold with *Weirdo*, because Groth made it clear to me right from the start with *Neat Stuff,* that if it was gonna work, I had to put all my energy behind it. It had to come out as often as possible, and so I tried to do that. It was all I could do to get it out three times a year. It was taking up all of my time and energy. Meanwhile, I was still supposed to be working on putting out *Weirdo* three or four times a year. For a while there, I think the first three or four issues of *Weirdo* that I put out, I was very proud of, but once I started doing *Neat Stuff,* I could see the strain taking hold and I just didn't have the time and energy to do the best job possible on *Weirdo.* I didn't want to quit *Weirdo*, I wanted to stick it out longer, and I even promised Crumb I'd do it longer, but it was just hurting the magazine. It just wasn't as good as it could be or should be, so for that reason I pushed the reins onto Aline Crumb, who at that time was ready to edit it herself, which was a good thing.

FEATURE: What was the climate like in comics at that time?

BAGGE: The time I was just describing where I stared doing *Neat Stuff* and then eventually gave up working on *Weirdo* would be 1985, '86. I had stopped completely doing *Weirdo* and in 1987 started working on *Neat Stuff* full time. Then because of that, as certain people would see *Neat Stuff,* I began to get offers for freelance work. I still was making terrible money, but by the end of the eighties I suddenly saw my income rising to an actual livable wage, which fortunately for me wasn't that big a problem because my wife in her business was making good enough money. I didn't have to sweat it, it wasn't like I was living on beans and rice. Of course being a typical male, I couldn't stomach the idea of living off of my wife [laughs]. I wanted to be the big breadwinner. Through the whole eighties, I just remember suffering mainly for financial reasons. In a way it was good, artistically it was good for me because it pushed me like crazy. I worked like a god damn dog all through the eighties not only producing a ton of work, but just constantly pushing myself to get better and better. I myself see a huge improvement in my artwork when you look at the first couple of *Neat Stuff*s to when you look at the last few. I think I really improved by leaps and bounds during that time. Not only was I drawing all the time, but I was just working it for my own magazine, just totally creating my own format. So it was a really healthy climate for me to grow and improve in.

Meanwhile, though, looking back I see that it was a very exciting and promising time because alternative comics were really starting to take off and explode by then until about 1990. The late eighties, early nineties, in my opinion, were like the golden age of comics, of all time. That's when Chester Brown was doing his best stuff, that's when [Dan] Clowes started doing *Eightball,* the Hernandez brothers were still doing fantastic stuff, everybody was. Robert Crumb was all of a sudden the best again, and lots and lots of new people were coming out of the woodwork, like Seth and Julie Doucet. Tons of people, too many to name, who all started out doing mini comics and then thanks to Fantagraphics and new companies like Drawn and Quarterly, and then all the people who were self publishing, there was so much stuff coming out under the alternative banner. Economically and marketwise it still wasn't a great situation and that's like the sad thing: that no huge market was ever found or created to support all this alternative stuff. I didn't understand then and I still don't understand now why more people in the public at large weren't more taken with all this stuff. I myself as a consumer was just awestruck by the stuff that was coming out at the time. I was just so excited about it and was evangelical with my zeal, just telling everybody about these comics. Showing everybody this stuff when it'd come through my door. Still it confuses and dismays me why it flat out didn't sell more, why we didn't all get stinking rich. But, oh well, what are you gonna do?

FEATURE: What do you attribute this tremendous burst of creative energy?

BAGGE: What I think it was, was people like myself, generally around my age. People like myself who grew up on and were able to digest what the original wave of underground cartoonists did. Which is basically, simply the notion that you can use the comics form to do literally anything. That the sky was the limit. Sadly, when the original underground comix first came out, they sold very well, but mainly because they really wallowed in sex, and drugs, and rock n roll. In retrospect you could say there was a certain sameness to almost all the underground comix that came out at that time in the late sixties and early seventies. They lived and prospered by that sword and then they died by that sword because people just got sick of it. It was so tied to the drug culture that it sold gangbusters through head shops as long as the head shops were open, but then they all got shut down. But the lesson that was learned by artists such as myself when we look back on those comics is again, just this idea that you can do anything, and there was no longer this economic impetus to try to follow that formula of sex, drugs, and rock n roll, and in fact the better cartoonists of those undergrounders and in fact the ones who survived and continued to do good work--Robert Crumb, Justin Green, Bill Griffith, art speigelman, Aline Crumb, and later Harvey Pekar--they kept doing inspiring work because they were becoming more and more autobiographical and were looking more and more inward and as a result just doing deeper and

more interesting work than what they and all their peers were doing at the beginning when it was just all, "Blaaagh!"

So, here you had a whole generation of new people who grew up knowing that it was allowed to do anything you want with comics, so everybody approached it completely differently. Also, I think in the early eighties it may have been a good thing that everybody was convinced that they'd never, quote unquote, make any money off of it. So therefore, they were approaching comics just totally as a way to express themselves and have fun and they didn't box themselves in at all trying to fit into some kind of market because undergrounds were dead. There was no point in trying to feed the demands of some of market, because the market was gone, it barely existed. So it was simply the sheer energy that people put into their own work that they began to inspire each other. The sheer force of all that energy and creativity and imagination that was going into it that a market, as small at it was, seemed to develop strictly around that.

FEATURE: What did you perceive as the goals of the alternative comics movement and do you think those goals were achieved?

BAGGE: Well, I can only speak for myself, I can't speak for anyone else's goals. In a way it's like everybody's approach to the comics was like a fine artist's approach. It's what fine art, quote unquote, is supposed to be about, but of course what I witnessed in New York growing up and going to art school had nothing to do with self expression. Everybody involved in the art world in New York that I could see were feeding the preexisting market and catering to people's prejudices and demands. It was just a market, just like any other. Part of their schtick, part of their game was saying, "Oh I'm totally expressing myself, I'm working from the soul," which is fine artists like to con themselves into thinking that's what they're doing, but it's not, they wanna get rich and they'll do whatever it takes to get rich and get attention. But here in comics, for the first time, the true fine art motive of pure self expression for the first time ever was being applied to the comics form *en masse*. It was the first time where nobody was catering to the demands of the market, because, like I said, the market didn't exist. So everybody was expressing themselves in their own way, and that's why you had such a wide divergence of styles and talents and approaches. Like the way Charles Burns draws, and Gary Panter draws, and the way I draw and write, and Lynda Barry, and Matt Groening, art speigelman, the Hernandez brothers, Dan Clowes, Chester Brown, actually all these people's styles are incredibly divergent, they're completely different. Like, there are people who love my work who can't stomach, say Lynda Barry and vice versa, and that wouldn't necessarily surprise me because there's a huge difference between all of us. We all have a very unique and individualistic drawing style and our whole approach was completely different. Each person was on his own planet. So, creatively and artistically I think the goal of self expression was achieved, and as a result, like I said before, I think better comics were made then than ever before in the history of the medium.

The one goal that I think wasn't met, as far as I'm concerned, was to establish a large enough market. A large enough amount of people out there that could support [a market] where [these cartoonists] could make a living or even potentially get rich. I guess, to be fair, I should be amazed that such a market existed at all. I guess that's one way of looking at it. If there was anybody out there that was willing to basically indulge artists like myself, you know. We weren't at all listening to what they wanted, they were buying what we wanted. These people were actually out there forking down money to read and look at exactly what I wanted to put down on paper. So I guess we should be thrilled that there were people there at all. Then it just reached a point where not only did the market stop going, it just began to shrink.

First off with mainstream comics when that speculative bubble burst four years ago and comic stores started going out of business like crazy, that was one problem, although the alternative comics market didn't plummet the way the mainstream market did. It actually held its own pretty well. At the same time, too, things weren't growing and I think that began to wear on the artists, because of course, like me, they started having hopes of having a nice, healthy career and making a healthy income off of their work and that just wasn't happening. A lot of people just hit this ceiling and couldn't get beyond it. Then I think a lot of disillusionment set in, and as a result, over the last three or four years, there's a certain sameness or flatness, there's just a spark that's gone in alternative comics. People are still doing great work, but that shock of the new is gone too. There's not a whole lot of new blood. There's not very many new

cartoonists I see who are doing really impressive work. There's a few notable exceptions like Adrian Tomine, but they're not coming in floods like they were five, six, seven years ago. The shock of the new is gone. A lot of people are still doing good work, but the shock of the new isn't there so what fans there were seem to have gotten spoiled. Now their attitude is, "What have you done for me lately? You're not shocking me and thrilling me any more. These alternative comics just don't make my blood race like they used to." Alan Moore, the last time I talked to him, said to me it's as if somebody has taken the top off the soda bottle and all the bubbles are gone. It still tastes good, but the fizz is gone.

FEATURE: What stuff are you seeing that you think is still worthwhile?

BAGGE: Well, I guess somewhat sadly when people ask me what stuff excites me, it's basically the same handful of artists. If you asked me seven or eight years ago who my favorite comic artists were, I'd give you the same answer I'd give you now. I still love what Dan Clowes and the Hernandez brothers are doing. Personally I'm glad that the Hernandez brothers stopped doing *Love and Rockets,* because as I was hoping, working on their own in new formats seems to have reenergized them. I love the new stuff they're doing, in fact I think the stuff that they're doing now is their best stuff ever. I really love what they've been doing since they've stopped doing *Love and Rockets.* Unfortunately, that's not reflected in sales. For some reason their sales have gone down since they stopped doing *Love and Rockets* and I can't figure that one out at all, but I think they're doing their best stuff ever. Dan Clowes keeps getting better all the time. Charles Burns is somebody who, when he does come out with a comic, I think is always pushing himself, is always doing better work. The same with Julie Doucet. I still basically follow everybody that's on Drawn and Quarterly or Fantagraphics. Some of them might disappoint or are kind of treading water, but I still will pick up and check out just about everything on those two imprints as well as a handful of others like I said, Charles Burns and people like that.

FEATURE: Are you interested in any work apart from the Fantagraphics and Drawn and Quarterly kind of stuff? Like I find it interesting that you said you were interested in Alan Moore.

BAGGE: Well, mainstream comics, there's simply nothing there for me. Even somebody who's technically a good writer like Neil Gaiman, I just have no use for it at all. Everything on Vertigo just leaves me cold. It's not that I'm saying it's no good or these guys are no good. If I look hard enough I can understand why fans of that comic may say, "I like this writer as opposed to that writer." That type of work and that genre just does nothing for me. I don't need it, I'm just not a fan of it. That's pretty much true of just about everybody that works in the mainstream of Marvel, DC, Image. The only exception is Alan Moore. He's the only one who works for the mainstream who's ever written anything that I really got something out of. More than anything else, it just has to do with the incredible amount of information that seems to be resting in his brain and what he does with that information.

As far as artists go, just about every American homegrown superhero artist leaves me cold. Nobody's done anything that excites me at all. A lot of the European artists, again coming out in the eighties, like a lot of the artists in the *Judge Dredd* school: Brian Bolland, Jamie Hewlett, David Lloyd, I think all those artists are great, amazing renderers. Their art is really beautiful and strong and individualistic. There's a bunch of artists from Spain, and Italy, and Germany who compared to me are a bit more mainstream or science fictiony and some of whom got work in American mainstream comics, that at least visually I think are interesting. I don't know if it's some kind of allergy or some kind of reaction, or what, but American superhero comics does absolutely nothing for me. If anything it just repulses me. Like Todd McFarlane, I met him, he's a nice guy, but his art gives me the creeps. What can I say except it's not for me

FEATURE: I guess I wasn't asking so much about the superhero stuff, because I have the same reaction to most of it...

BAGGE: Oh, okay [laughs].

FEATURE: What I was thinking was, do you get anything out of the more "ground level" comics that aren't really mainstream or underground? I'm talking about books like *From Hell* and *Cerebus*, for example.

BAGGE: *From Hell* is fantastic. But guys like Sim and Terry Moore, I guess I'd be much more generous towards Sim than of course certainly I would be towards generic superhero cartoonists. They're good at what they do, but their work just personally doesn't grab me. Again, I think someone like Sim, he's a talented guy and he's very good at what he's doing, he puts out a good product, but *Cerebus,* artwise and storywise just never grabbed me. Guys like that do good work. I would agree with their fans that they're skilled artists and storytellers, but it's the more underground stuff that really floats my boat.

FEATURE: The market is pretty much as dead now as it's ever been for alternative cartoonists and pretty much across the board...

BAGGE: Right.

FEATURE: Do you think there's any possibility of rekindling that same early eighties energy? You know that, "There's no market for it, but fuck it, I have to do it anyway." Do you see that on the horizon?

BAGGE: Well, yeah. I think that something like I described in the eighties could happen again, but first of all let me dwell on the negatives for a minute [laughs]. I pretty much despair of ever having what I was talking about and what I was hoping for, having a big market for alternative comics where a lot of people can make a nice living at it. A big, viable mass market I think at this point is out of the question. It's just because I've been involved in this racket for so long and if it hasn't happened by now, I can't imagine why it suddenly would happen. Also, something that makes me despair about not just comics, but the print medium as a whole, is the cheapness and accessibility and availability of all kinds of electronic media, especially the internet. You just can't compete with the cheapness of it and the quickness of it. The

print medium across the board--books, magazines, comics--are taking it in the shorts for that very reason. I can see though, there being another burst of energy and creativity in comics down the road. I think what will cause that is another group of young cartoonists, who, again will probably go to art school and think, "The only future for me as a cartoonist is to work in an electronic medium and become part of the corporate entertainment machine," but anyone who's a weirdo, outcast rebel like I was will be sure to be frustrated or intimidated or completely turned off by the thought of "working for the man." And yet, at the same time it's very hard to be completely on your own and independently do something electronic. The overall costs of producing anything, even if it's some animated type of thing that you want to put on your website, the costs of that are so high and the returns are so low that I think once again the comic book form would really appeal to them.

When you create a comic book you can hold it in your hand, you can sell it to somebody, you can mail it to somebody. It is still a viable object with obvious worth, if there's any talent in the comic at all. But also, creatively speaking, you can be a total Hitler with your comic book. You can draw everything, write everything, do everything yourself. You can even go to Kinko's and print it yourself. I think there will be in the next five to ten years a whole new wave of young artists who will adopt comics again for that very reason, just for them to have complete control. When you have complete control like that, then you have total say and you can completely stick to and show off your own particular vision with a comic book, and I still can't think of anything that's better than a comic book for doing something like that. For that reason I think there'll be a second wave. Whether it will generate as much or more excitement, or interest, or *money* [laughs], as this last wave did, unfortunately I kind of doubt it. But I can still see waves coming up in the future.

HUH? WHO SAID THAT? I'M PICKING UP BAD VIBES FROM SOME-WHERE...
OH, HEY STINKY, THIS IS MY LITTLE BROTHER, BUTCH! YOU REMEMBER BUTCH, DON'T YOU?

FEATURE: You were saying that comics you can't see breaking into the mainstream, but do you think it still has potential as a viable niche market?

BAGGE: Well, that's all it can be. This is something that very much depresses me because I wanted to have it both ways. I wanted to express myself and do exactly my own thing and have everyone do the same in the form of a comic book, but I also wanted it to be a mass market. I wanted it to be accessible and in some way potentially appeal to, if not everybody, since nothing appeals to *everybody*, at least a hell of a lot more than the people who are buying it now. It just drives me nuts that tens of millions of people would watch and love *The Simpsons* whereas you're lucky if only like a hundred *thousand* people would ever even be exposed to my comic book.

There's just such a limited amount of people who would ever even lay eyes on it because it's in comic shops and there's even so many comic shops that wouldn't even carry *Hate*, or if they carried it, they carried one copy and kept it behind the counter. I was always trying to figure out a way to do exactly what I wanted to do but get it out there and get more people to see it, but it's just not happening. It just doesn't work and I can't help but think that most Americans are just flat out not taken with the form. They simply have no use for comics *period* and it doesn't matter what's in it, what material's in it, whether they'll think it's hilarious or not, they just can't be bothered with comic books.

FEATURE: Let's swing things back to your art. You said that you found your voice doing *Neat Stuff*, so what kinds of things were you doing with that book that made you hit upon that, "Eureka! This is what I want to be doing!"

BAGGE: Well, my stock and trade I always felt was just being a "funny guy". I liked having a really cartoony, silly, exaggerated drawing style. If I were to describe to anybody why they'd want to read *Neat Stuff*, I'd just say, "Well, it's a funny book," but I always tried to have the humor go down beneath the surface. I always wanted it, and still do, I like having my comic being deceptively simple. Like, "Here's a plain old funny book, look at the funny drawings. Ha ha ha. Look, this guy farted, this guy fell down. Yuck yuck yuck." But then as you start reading it and start to watch the relationships unfold between the characters, it starts to dig deeper. It starts to ring a little true. People would always tell me that they'd be laughing at my stories, but they'd find it a little unsettling. I like that response [laughs], because I like to think that my stories would stay with them. I didn't want to just make people laugh and then as soon as they'd put it down they'd forget about it. I liked the idea that my stories would stay with them, that it meant a little bit more than just getting a cheap laugh. That's what I tried to hone and develop and work on in *Neat Stuff*. I worked with all different characters like Girly Girl, and Goon on the Moon, and the Bradleys, and all of these types of people and I tended to draw all of each character in a different style. I mean, you could tell it was all drawn by Pete Bagge, but I was still experimenting a lot with rendering. Like, should I cross hatch, should I not cross hatch? Should I use a pen, should I use a brush? Should I just use technical pens? I was still experimenting a lot and trying to figure out what was the best approach. In the meantime too, I enjoyed that. I liked having a magazine that was a one man anthology. I was proud of the fact that I was able to produce something that I thought had so much variety and characters and variations of style. But what tended to happen was that I started to hit a brick wall with almost all of the characters except for the Bradleys, in particular Buddy

Bradley. There was no mystery behind that either because the Bradleys, and particularly Buddy Bradley, were much more autobiographical than the other characters. As a result, there was a lot more to work with there because I basically had my whole life and all of my life experiences to work from and to put into Buddy Bradley and the Bradley family stories.

FEATURE: Tell me more about how the Bradley stories are autobiographical both through *Neat Stuff* and as you got into *Hate.*

BAGGE: Well, from the very first time I drew the Bradleys--I was just joking around with my friends and I doodled this strip called "The Bradleys" and I knew exactly what it was right off the bat. When I said, "Here's the Bradleys!" and it was just a one page thing where I introduced each family member. The idea was that they were being presented and sold and packaged as if it was the Brady Bunch. "Here's this all American family, oh boy!" Then everything ended in exclamation points. "Pops Bradley is on the rampage again!" You know, he's drunk and he wants to punch somebody, is punching holes into the wall. Buddy is zoned out on drugs, just listening to records. So what it was, it was my family. It was the Bagges being introduced and presented in the same way that you'd introduce the Brady Bunch. "Here's this lovable, wacky family!" and I still draw them that way. I'd still draw the Bradleys as this loveable cartoon family. "Let's yuck it up with the Bradleys," but then when you read it it's all about alcoholism, and abortions and death [roaring laughter], all the grim stuff. It's all very ironic and it all very much appeals to my extremely black sense of humor. It is my way of dealing with the harsh realities of life, just to laugh at it.

I'D CALL IT GOOD OL' BACK-TO-BASICS, NO-NONSENSE, FULL-ON, NO-HOLDS-BARRED, IN-YOUR-FACE
ROCK 'N' ROLL!
GROWL!
WOW, THAT'S QUITE A WORD...
PUMP! PUMP!

Back when I was an adolescent all the manifestations of life and impending adulthood were really starting to cascade upon me and I could not deal with it. I was just a nervous wreck when I was thirteen, fourteen years old. I always felt like I was *sick*, even though there was nothing really wrong with me. I'd have my mother take me to the doctor because I kept complaining about being sick, but it was just nerves. My nerves were shot. The truth was I was just an incredibly high strung, hypersensitive kid. I suppose there were other kids who felt the same way I did who, I guess they turned to things like heroin. That was how they managed to put off or deal with or survive the harsh realities of life. They turned to drugs or turned to who knows what. It's really obvious to me now that I turned to comics and used my comics to tell my stories as a way of not just dealing with life, but surviving it. As the years have gone by I've developed this really black, almost cruel sense of humor, but it's just my way of deflecting the grim, harsh realities. It's either laugh or cry. Either laugh about this stuff or what else am I gonna do, sit in the corner and cry all day [laughs]? It's just the way I deal with things.

FEATURE: What precipitated your closing out *Neat Stuff* and starting up *Hate*?

BAGGE: The whole time I was doing *Neat Stuff* I was always cognizant of the fact that what really would be ideal is if one character, or one style, or one format would just click and it would just tell me this is the way to go. Again, while I enjoyed experimenting with all the different characters in *Neat Stuff,* I felt what really would be great and what probably would be the most effective, as far as the public would be concerned, is if I could lock on to one character and go to town with him. That finally came to be with Buddy Bradley.

As *Neat Stuff* went along I did more and more Bradley family stories and Buddy Bradley was becoming the main focus of the Bradley family stories. It was weird because they were the most simple and direct stories I was doing in *Neat Stuff,* but they were the most painful because they were so personal. Each time I did a story with Buddy Bradley it was like jumping into a pool of cold water. I was a little bit afraid to expose these elements of myself and my own life through this character which is what I was doing. I'd always be afraid everyone was gonna laugh at me when the story came out. Everybody was gonna say, "I could tell that this is you. What a jerk you were. You did this when you were in high school? How pathetic." But the exact opposite happened. My interest in Buddy Bradley, if anything, was only fueled by the incredibly positive response I'd get from readers when they'd read the stories I was doing particularly with Buddy. Even women readers, like Mary Fleener, kept telling me, "I know I'm a girl, but I feel just like Buddy Bradley, I totally relate to that guy. Do more stories with that character, he's great." Then, by the time I stopped doing *Neat Stuff* I was trying to come up with a new title, a new format, and all of that. By that time in my life I was married, starting to make a decent income, I owned a house, my wife was pregnant. So all of a sudden I was approaching middle age, I was already in my thirties, and everything was different now. I was like, Joe Homeowner. Joe Married-Middle Aged Guy. Once that fully sank in I was able to look at the previous ten, fifteen years of my life, my "early years of bitter struggle" objectively. All of a sudden all of that became part of my past and I was able to encapsulate all of it as stories. Things happening to Buddy Bradley in *Hate,* if they were happening to me now, they wouldn't be very funny. I would still be in

the thick of it. It's too grim to laugh at and too close to home for me to write about objectively. But now, all of a sudden, that I was this middle aged married guy with a kid and a house and all of that, I was able to look at those years objectively and it just suddenly looked like a goldmine of stories. So I considered: A) making them strictly autobiographical and drawing myself, or B) creating a new character who's a twentysomething based on myself, but then I realized I already had this character Buddy Bradley who's pretty much "developed." I'd been working with him for years and he'd pretty much been aging the whole time I was working with him in *Neat Stuff*, so I decided I'd quickly add on, the way they do in the soap operas, I'll just slap on a quick five years on this guy [chuckles] and use him as the conduit for all these story ideas I had from my own life. That's pretty much how he took off.

FEATURE: Do you still have that same trepidation every time you lay down a Buddy story? Is it still like "jumping into a pool of cold water?"

BAGGE: Ummm, yeah, yes I do, off and on. I'm no longer afraid to expose things about myself. Of course I get story ideas from all over the place and you can't write about yourself without writing about people that you know in your life. I worry about how people who I'm in relationships or friendships with, what their take on it will be. Will they be insulted? Will they be shocked? Actually, yeah, to tell you the truth, I don't worry so much, but I wonder with every story I do how this is gonna play with the readership. I worry, am I gonna start to lose them? The core demographic of alternative comics is still people between eighteen and twenty-five, and I suppose that also contributed a lot to why those early black and white *Hate*s did so well because, as it turned out, the characters happened to be about the same age as the people who buy alternative comics in general. So they responded to it immediately, related to it immediately, but now Buddy Bradley is still continuing to age. He's a guy in his late twenties now, maybe almost early thirties, and he's slowly getting away from that slacker, early twenty-something, rock show goer. He doesn't do any of that anymore. He's a miserly, lonely businessman [laughs]. They tell me that they can't relate to this character any more and, unfortunately, your readership doesn't age with you. So that's a bit of a concern. Am I losing my audience, is a distance growing between me and them?

Y'KNOW, I WISH I HAD A CAMERA RIGHT NOW. THERE'S SOMETHING SO JUST—SO TRUE! —ABOUT THIS PICTURE!
I THINK I'D CALL IT "THE NEIGHBORHOOD TRASH". KEEP IT NICE 'N' SIMPLE, IF YOU GET MY MEANING...
DON'T YOU ACT ALL HIGH AND MIGHTY WITH ME, MR. BRADLEY! YOU'RE AN EVEN BIGGER SLUT THAN I AM, ONLY NO ONE WANTS TO FUCK YOU 'CUZ YOU'RE TOO UGLY!
EXORCIST FACE

Plus, I'm always told by both my friends and the readers that the stories in *Hate* seem to be growing darker and darker all the time and my sense of humor seems to be getting crueler and darker all the time. Like with Stinky's death, a lot of people had a hard time with that. I thought it was hilarious, but of course not too many other people did [laughs]. One person asked me if I was mentally ill [laughs]! And I even laugh at that question [laughs]!

FEATURE: Why don't you tell me about your creative process with *Hate*, you know, apart from the mechanics. What kinds of ideas are you trying to get into with each issue of the book?

BAGGE: Well, I've always had a pretty good idea of what was gonna happen in the next three or four issues. Like when I was first doing the black and white ones and then again when I started doing the color ones, I wrote down lists of ten to fifteen story ideas and I tend to cross them off. Like starting with *Hate* #16 I wrote down, like, another ten or fifteen ideas for stories I'd be doing down the road, and I've used most of them. Sometimes I completely discard some stories, and sometimes I combine them, and sometimes I come up with completely new ones, but for the most part I use almost all these ideas. So I have a really good idea way down the road of where I'm going. Even though each issue of *Hate* generally stands on its own, it's all part of a story arc. I am going somewhere with it. I don't know what it is with the number fifteen, I did fifteen issues of *Neat Stuff*, then fifteen black and white *Hates*, and it looks like I would like to end the Buddy Bradley stories with *Hate #30*. Let's put it this way, I'm hard pressed to figure out where to go beyond #30 in a way that will make sense. I don't want the characters and stories to start to tread water. I don't want to Buddy to be like Dagwood Bumstead bumping into his mailman every day for fifty years.

FEATURE: What could you see yourself doing if you decide to end the Buddy Bradley stories at #30.

BAGGE: Well therein lies the *crux*. I've slowly been turning *Hate* into an anthology. Ever since *Weirdo* ceased to exist, there's been other anthologies, but I never saw any comic anthologies that had *Weirdo's* spirit--that really wacky, crazy, iconoclastic, bratty kid, type of aesthetic to it. Most anthologies try to be a bit stuffy, highbrow, and formal, and seem to be pleading with the reader to take them seriously. I

don't mean to condemn them. I like them. There's a lot of anthologies I think are worthwhile to some degree, but there's nothing like *Weirdo*. So I've been slowly turning *Hate* into *Weirdo* by using other artists and, in the back, I'm starting to collaborate with different cartoonists. I think I'd like to keep going with that. I mean, I could keep calling it *Hate*, but put a very end to the Buddy Bradley stories and just open it wide up to all kinds of crazy stuff. For economic reasons it's a scary thought [laughs], just going back to the drawing board basically and experimenting again. I like to think that will once again lead to something really inspired and creative if I do go back to the drawing board and just start doing all kinds of crazy shit and just see what clicks again.

FEATURE: Artistically, where do you see yourself going if you do bring the Buddy Bradley stuff to a close? What's your sensibility now and what would you like to explore and get into that you haven't gotten into yet?

BAGGE: Well, I'm really enjoying working with other cartoonists. Did you see the last couple of *Hate*s, did you see the one where I did something with Crumb and before that with Gilbert Hernandez?

FEATURE: Yeah, of course.

BAGGE: Well in the new one there's a back up story that I wrote, that Adrian Tomine drew. I'm really enjoying that, it's real surprising to see the end results of it. I'm thrilled that these artists are willing to work with me, because I'm asking my favorite cartoonists to collaborate with me. So of course I'm shocked and thrilled at the finished products because I like these guys' drawing so much, and *I* didn't have to draw it [laughs]. It's a way to avoid both inking *and* penciling, just let somebody else do it. Really what I physically enjoy doing and what I think I'm best at is just writing and breaking down a story. Like I said, the actual drudgery of doing the finished story, mainly the inking, but also the penciling, I'm just getting sick of it [laughs]. I'm sick of drawing, so it's fun to have someone else do it. At the same time, though, it's hard for me to think of myself as a cartoonist if I don't sit down and draw. So, what I'm leaning towards, whether I call it *Hate* or give it a new name, in this new format I'd like to A) have it open to other cartoonists to submit their work and use it as a vehicle for new cartoonists to find an audience, and then B) continue to work with other artists where I write stories, mainly in a satirical vein that other cartoonists draw. I'll probably come up with, and in fact I have an idea for, a new character. I don't want to talk about it too much, because I don't know if I'm gonna do it or not, but I do have an idea for a new regular continuing character. It's not going to be something as ambitious or as involved as the Buddy Bradley stories, but just a little thing that I would draw myself that would just be a little continuing character.

FEATURE: What are the most pressing issues facing you as a cartoonist right now?

BAGGE: Money [laughs]. The creative stuff is the easy part. What I've just described to you is exactly what I want to do. In an ideal world it's what I hope and intend to be doing, but is it gonna pay off? Will it pay the bills? What the hell is gonna happen? Is my wife gonna have to go back to work and, if she does, what kind of crimp is that gonna put into my work schedule? Unfortunately it's all of those grim, real life problems: money and time and all of that. That's the fly in the ointment.

FEATURE: Not just talking, say, two years down the road, but really long term, where do you see yourself going as an artist? What do you want for your future as an artist?

BAGGE: To be real direct and real succinct. I would like to be able to keep doing exactly what I want to do, completely what I want to do and make real good money at it [laughs]. It's a real tricky thing which I suppose is true with everybody. I'm not trying to be glib with that answer, but that's just the simple truth. Like I said, I'm real clear in my mind about what I find inspiring and what I want to do, but the big, big, big question is whether I can afford to do it at this point. I'm not a kid anymore and living in a garret and not being responsible for anybody but myself. Those days are over, so it's not that easy just to sit down with a piece of paper and do whatever the heck I want. I have too many other considerations, so we'll see what happens.

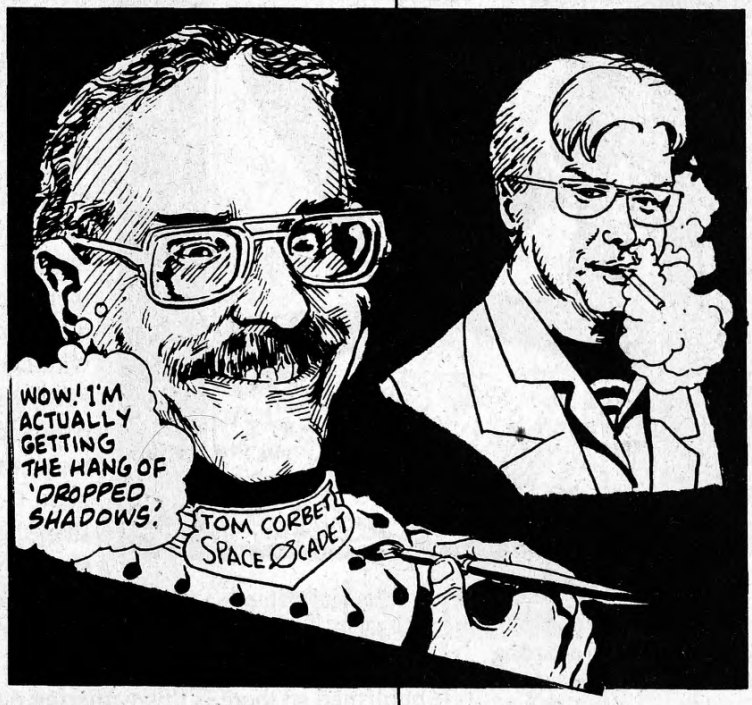
I also, to be honest, have been very actively pursuing with a more desperate air than ever, I'm sorry to say, trying to figure out a way to get my characters, either from *Hate* or some other characters, on the screen. Either television or movies. I've been going down this road for the last five years with nothing to show for it so far. Right now I'm more aggressively pursuing it than ever, especially television. I have an easier time envisioning my characters being on TV than a movie. Of course if that pans out, if I get a TV show-- this is the game plan which of course could all go afoul for all kinds of reasons and probably will-- but it would just be great if I could make the money off a television show and everything associated with that, merchandising and all that nonsense, and use that to support the family and subsidize my comics. Then I could afford to indulge myself and wouldn't have to think twice about whether whatever comic I'm working on is gonna make money or not. That would be the perfect case scenario, but it's a lot easier said than done.

The Dave and Larry Show

Dave Sim and Larry Marder on the State of the Industry

It is unlikely that one could ever have a conversation about the state of affairs in the comics business without the names Dave Sim or Larry Marder coming up. Both men have risen to prominence in the field since the early eighties and in that time have come to be two of the most knowledgeable and respected members of the comic book community. While both men are respected figures in the business, they are equally well regarded as creators. Since 1977, Dave Sim has been self publishing his three hundred issue comic book epic, *Cerebus*. In the time that he's been publishing, Sim has acted as a vocal advocate of creators' rights and self publishing. Although he has been very active in the business, he has never strayed too far from the drawing board, putting out a comic every month for over seventeen years.

Less prolific than Sim, but equally well regarded, Larry Marder has been writing and drawing *Beanworld*, his personal myth, since the early eighties. Marder has also been very active in creators' rights and the self publishing community. While working full time in advertising, Marder was drawing Beanworld and advising creators on the side throughout the eighties. Marder became such a trusted advisor to the comic book community that in the early nineties he took a position with the Moondog's retail chain in Chicago. In that position, he organized countless signings and gained the title, "The Nexus of All Comic Book Realities," Nexus meaning the convergence point between the various elements of the comic book community. Since that time, Marder has left Moondog's to become the Executive Director of Image Comics, overseeing the higher day to day operations of the company and acting as a "shuttle diplomat" between studios. Because of the tremendous amount of time and energy that goes into his Image position, Marder refers to himself as the retired Nexus and the active "Consiglieri of All Comic Book Realities." Despite all of his work on the business side of Image, Larry still manages to find time for *Beanworld*. He is currently in the middle of a new story and is actively bringing all of his earlier *Beanworld* work back into print as trade paperbacks.



Eighteen months ago, immediately following the announcement of DC, Image, Dark Horse, and Acclaim exclusivity with Diamond, Charles Brownstein visited Larry Marder in Anaheim where the two of them called Sim up for a three way conversation on the state of the business. In May of this year, Brownstein once again spoke with Marder and Sim, this time about the recent changes in the comic book landscape, including Diamond's assimilation of Capital and Heroes World, the state of creator ownership, and the current face of the direct market.

FEATURE: It's been roughly a year and a half since we last did one of these and in that time the industry has seen one tumultuous event after another. Before we get into the state of the overall industry, let's take a look at how the two of you have been affected over the last eighteen months. What's the state of Aardvark-Vanaheim and what's the state of *Beanworld*? [Sim laughs].

LARRY MARDER: You wanna start, Dave?

DAVE SIM: Not especially.

FEATURE: Well, Larry started last time.

SIM: Oh, okay. Everything's fine [laughs].

MARDER: That's a good answer. Okay, the state of *Beanworld*. Well, I'm working on the exact same project that I was eighteen months ago. It's an eighty page story that used to be called *Float Force*. It's called something else now, but I'm not sure what. I have about forty pages inked. I have recently written a new beginning and a new ending to it *because* the story

originally centered around the baby beans growing up and they were slowly turning into the Image partners and I was going to do a piece about that, but really, quite frankly, after the whole Liefeld/Silvestri blowup, I found myself absolutely unable to do that story now. I was really lucky in the sense that the forty pages that I already inked were all savable, but I had to give it a new beginning and a new end. Now the story is about the Big Fish coming back and Mr. Spook getting its fork returned to its original condition.

SIM: Hmm. Sounds interesting. How close did that happen to the actual blowup taking place?

MARDER: I was starting to ink those pages and I went "Bissette" on myself [laughs]. I just sat there at the drawing board holding the pen and couldn't make my hand move. I'd never experienced that before. Now I know what those guys are talking about. I was just depressed. And it's over. You know, I've got a good twenty, thirty pages of material that will probably be a better story someday, it'll probably be my next story, but I probably won't work on that material until I'm out of Image. I think it's just a little bit too close. It's hard to be doing stuff that's funny about Jim Lee, and funny about Todd [McFarlane], and funny about Erik Larsen when it's also happening on an everyday level.

SIM: Yeah, that's gotta be tough.

MARDER: This might be my old man, Will Eisner story, you know [laughs]

SIM: You're probably right. It's interesting because it really seemed to all go its way into *Beanworld* and fall into place. I guess that's just one of those, you don't know it's a misapprehension until you get there and you've gotta back up...

MARDER: Yeah, you don't know that you took a wrong turn until you're lost in the woods.

SIM: Right, right. Hmm.

MARDER: Although, shit happens.

FEATURE: Let's move into the interview...

SIM: Okay [laughs].

MARDER: Okay, enough of that [laughs]

FEATURE: No, no, no, I'm going to put that introductory stuff in there, it's just that transition came out of my mouth wrong. Let's get some general thoughts on the current business. Where are we now compared to two years ago?

SIM: We're in exactly the same spot.

FEATURE: We're not worse? We're not better?

SIM: I don't know. I have trouble with collectivist terms You're asking me to do an assessment of essentially a lot of other people simultaneously. The only way I can really answer that is from my own vantage point which is to say I don't think anything of any importance has changed in the comic book field.

MARDER: My turn? I think things have gotten better because they got so much worse. I think that Dave, when you and I had that conversation in [Star Clipper retailer] Carol Denbow's room in St. Louis in I think Spring of '94 which was three years ago, and we were arguing to the retailers in the room that, "The direct sales market is dead already, but you guys just don't know it yet." I think that the process that I envisioned at that point in time has occurred. I didn't know it was going to happen the way that it occurred because I don't think anybody really foresaw Marvel doing what they did with Heroes World.

FEATURE: What did you envision?

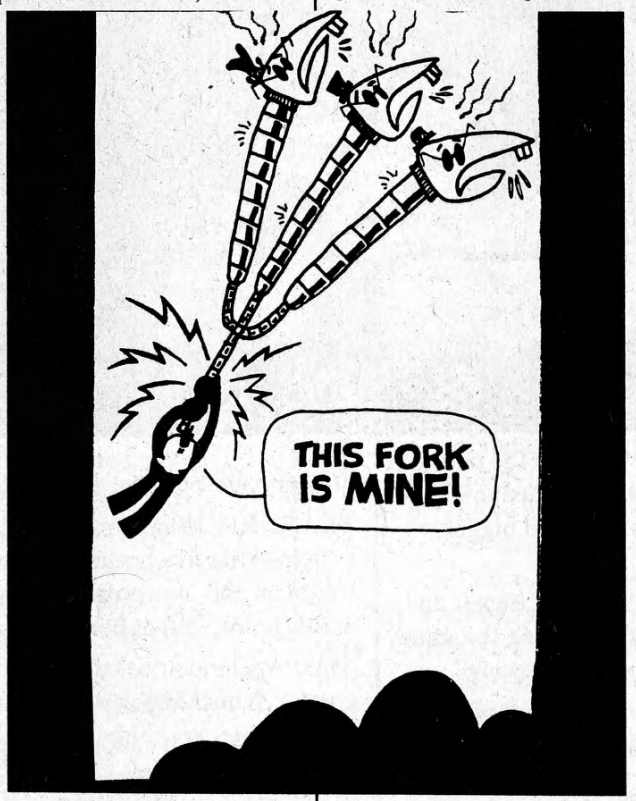
MARDER: That the comic book economic system of stores catering to the superhero genre was in a state of failure. That superhero comics were not delivering the goods to the people that were coming into the stores and that there would be fewer and fewer stores and that there would probably be fewer and fewer consumers. I think what we were all hoping for was that the stores would be able to turn the market base around a little more quickly to embrace self publishers and independent products and things like that. It felt like, at that moment, that we might be able to do it, but obviously other economic realities took hold and there were some major setbacks mathematically. I sort of agree with Dave in the sense that everything's fine. There are people doing good work, and as long as there are people doing good work then comics are in good shape. There are fewer and fewer stores every month. The publishers cater to those stores producing material that sells to the hardcore people that are left, but the people that are on the fringes of that hardcore are disgusted with what is being published so there is this withering out, this culling of the customer fan base. I don't not know, sitting where I am right now, whether this process has actually stabilized or not. I suspect it really hasn't.

FEATURE: Dave, do you have any thoughts?

SIM: Yeah, I suppose [Sim and Marder laugh]. I've come to perceive the comics environment as having its own consciousness in addition to its physical form -- number of companies, number of titles, number of stores, etc.--and I believe that the consciousness governs the physical dimensions. That is, the number of companies, number of titles, number of stores expand in response to the consciousness perceiving that something "good" is happening, that something "good" is

possible. There seems to be an in-built perceived ratio of good shit to bad shit -- an acknowledgement that there will always be more bad shit than good shit --coupled with a "capping mechanism" which causes the environment to make itself smaller at the exact point that the ratio begins to drastically favor bad shit.

The rise of Marvel Comics in the early 'sixties, the Batman television show, the influx of the underground in 1968-69, the emergence of ground-level comic books like *Witzend*, *Star*Reach* and so on: Each functioned as a signal that it was time to expand. Good shit was possible! The "capping mechanism" kicked in when Marvel started to put out too much, imitation Marvel companies proliferating like bacteria in a petrie dish, DC attempting to imitate Marvel. Same thing with the undergrounds -- the good shit to bad shit ratio started to favor the bad shit so the expansion was arrested. Star*Reach got supplanted by First and Pacific. For every *American Flagg*! there were three dozen interchangeable *X-Men* rip-off titles. Self-publishing is the same way. It expands in 1984-85, 1993-94 until the ratio of good shit to bad shit drastically favors bad shit and then the expansion is arrested. In the pre-direct market days, the environment was capable of lying dormant for years at a time. It would "exhale" impurities and lapse into survival mode, waiting for something good -- or potentially good -- to happen so that it could expand again. It still does this, in my view, but the periods of "lying dormant" in the direct market age are much shorter. I think the consciousness is completely at peace whether its expanding or lying dormant -- inhaling or exhaling.



FEATURE: But Dave, we're in pure survival mode right now and I don't think anybody's at peace.

SIM: Well I am.

FEATURE: Okay.

MARDER: Of course you are, you're in your home stretch [laughs].

SIM: No, the book's in the home stretch. I hope I get a few more years after that. And actually the periodical *Cerebus* is in the home stretch, the trade paperbacks and how they do in the direct market are going to suffer from the effects of exhaling and benefit from the inhaling for many years after March, 2004. And (laughs) the periodical *Cerebus* is only in the home stretch relative to itself. The remaining seventy-nine issues would constitute a career for most cartoonists: three graphic novels of 240 pages, 700 pages and 700 pages respectively--that would constitute five or six decades of work for almost anyone else.

FEATURE: The biggest change has gotta be that of distribution. It goes without saying that inside of these past two years we've gotten to the point of having one major distributor. This puts us in what Veitch calls, "The age of the benevolent dictatorship." What do you guys call it? What are the implications of having one distributor?

MARDER: Well, I know too much about all this shit [laughs]. Which Larry are you asking this? The *Beanworld* one?

FEATURE: Why don't they both try it.

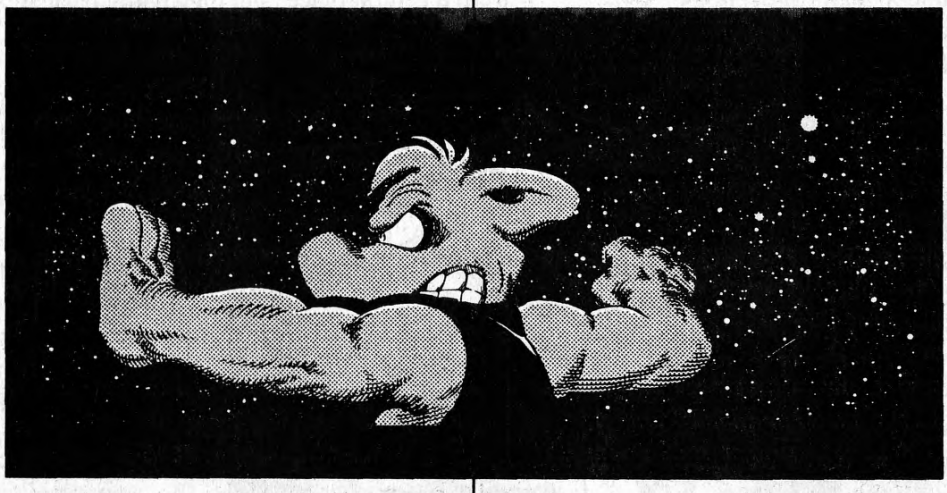
MARDER: Are we in a period of benevolent dictatorship? From Image's point of view we're not in the sense that we're dealing with only one distributor, but they don't actually distribute for us. We sell directly to the retailers. So Image comics in a certain sense aren't distributed by Diamond, they're delivered. Distribution is a word that implies being dispersed from a central place, and they really basically move from one place to another place. Diamond is a carrier. If you're in a situation where it's *Beanworld*, *Beanworld* sells a majority of its books to Diamond, but it also sells to Cold Cut and to Tower and to Hobby Games, and that sort of stuff where there is distribution, but it is certainly lopsided to say the least. So are we better off or are we worse than we were before? Personally I don't feel like I'm selling any fewer books, but I know that when I ship them, I'll not gonna have any problem at all getting paid on 95% of them. So, that part's better.

Again, with Image, Image has privilege that is contractual. Image is in a situation where we feel much more in control of our destinies than we did under the old system. But to be a new guy coming up now and having a book that has value, be it the next *Bone,* or the next *Beanworld*, or the next whatever, I gotta say that I'm glad I'm not in that position. I gotta say that's a tough thing to be. To be a Xeric Award winner today and Diamond not have any enthusiasm for your book, that's not a position I'd want to be in. So I'd have to sort of agree with Veitch in the sense that it's a benevolent dictatorship and then hope that [it] remains benevolent. But there's no question in my mind that [Diamond owner] Steve Geppi loves comic books. He *loves* comic books.

SIM: I see it as DC, Dark Horse, Image and now Marvel have -- at one unconscious level or another--perceived that death is inevitable for them because they are not really suited to the environment per se. They have become the incarnation of the impurities that are going to be exhaled in the course of the current period of exhalation which started with Marvel buying Heroes World. Their solution has been to lock themselves

inside of Diamond with the idea that -- I don't know -- that they can't get exhaled if they're hanging onto Steve Geppi's ankles? They've chosen to lock themselves inside the largest distributor where they instantly got much smaller than they were and they've continued to shrink month by month since then. That's the only difference that I see.

DC, Dark Horse, Image and Marvel perceive themselves as Real Comic Book Companies -- as opposed to Aardvark-Vanaheim or Sirius or Caliber or *Beanworld* Press which they consider Fake Comic Book Companies or Not Really Comic Book Companies. Given that that perception originates with the notion of Bigness --Realness being measured in terms of Bigness--Realness and Bigness being measured in terms of the Bottom Line consisting of gross sales and net profits--they are failing miserably at their own game. I think the Diamond exclusives deals were an attempt to distract themselves from their own failures -- to make Bigness a matter of their relation to one another. DC is bigger than Image. Image is bigger than Dark Horse. It was a way of avoiding facing the fact that they are all dwindling away to nothing -- getting smaller and smaller and smaller in all of the areas: gross sales, net profits, circulation per title, total circulation --where, in the context of their own game it is critically, centrally and unavoidably important and necessary that they get bigger and bigger and bigger.



MARDER: Well I don't think anybody can get bigger and bigger and bigger at this point, I think that staying the same size is pretty good these days. I mean who's growing? Nobody.

SIM: It depends on what you're talking about. The *Cerebus* storyline is growing. I'll flatter myself that the richness of the material is growing, the complexity is growing -- certainly my own connection with the material is growing by leaps and bounds at this point (knock wood). The environment inhaling and exhaling doesn't affect that. But the extended period of exhalation that began with Marvel buying Heroes World means that Marvel and DC and Dark Horse and Image are getting smaller and smaller. If they could even stay the same size in gross sales, net profits, circulation per title, total circulation -- they'd be organizing a Victory Parade around the dealer's room in San Diego this year. In the context of their own game, comic books are just sales: Once you have said what a comic book sells you have defined everything important about it.

MARDER: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, because that's what publishers do. Publishers manufacture products that are distributed to consumers. It has nothing to do with art.

SIM: And in that context they are failing, they are dying -- getting smaller and smaller and smaller. Everything that they are doing is producing the exact opposite effect to what they are trying to achieve--which is better numbers in their bottom line.

MARDER: Well I think a lot of people are still producing better numbers than their bottom line. I think people are still making money.

SIM: Better numbers "in" their bottom line. Each company has a handful of successes in any given month or a franchise that exhibits sudden signs of life -- like the JLA at DC -- but to focus on isolated, temporary successes and to focus on success relative to low-end titles....Marvel's most successful book this month outsold DC's most successful book, Dark Horse's #1 title outsold 85% of the Image line this month...is corporate whistling-past-the-graveyard. This quarter was not better than last quarter; last quarter was not better than the quarter before that which was not better than the quarter before that. Gross sales are down, net profits are down, circulation per title is down, total circulation is down. Down, down, down. Month by month, quarter by quarter, year by year. Down, down, down.

FEATURE: What are the implications of the one distributor system--effective one distributor system, I'll talk about guys like Cold Cut and Downtown later--on the creator and the publisher at this point? What position does this put them in?

SIM: Again, you're talking about "the" publisher and "the" creator, [chuckles] if you wanna give me a name on each one...

FEATURE: How about Dave Sim and Aardvark Vanaheim.

SIM: What are the implications of one distributor? None that I can really see. I mean, one of the central articles of faith that Gerhard and I have with this experiment is that there is demand for the work. People are going to hear about the trade paperbacks and get interested and then be interested in following the story to its conclusion. So consequently everything that changes in between there--there are things where I think, "Gee, that's a damn shame," or, "That's not my preference of how it would be"--but we try not to take our eyes off of the fact that a system will exist, a system will be in place to move comic books and trade paperbacks from our warehouse in Leamington to the customer. That's really the bottom line on it. Yeah, it might very well be Diamond in the exact proportion that it is now--whatever share of *Cerebus* that they sell like 90%, 95%--it could be when issue 300 comes out that that's the same. If you had asked me at issue #17 and #18 when we were exclusive with

Seagate, "What do you think will be happening at issue #218?" I would have said that "There might be some more distributors, but Seagate will still be the one."

MARDER: Yeah, it's hard to predict the future [chuckles].

SIM: And particularly relative to the means, which is really what we are talking about here. I take it as a given that -- at least for the foreseeable future -- it is necessary to have a structure, a means, of getting *Cerebus* comic books and trade paperbacks from our warehouse to people who are interested in buying them and owning them and reading them. From the standpoint of an individual retailer or retailers as a group, what is the most efficient and effective way of accomplishing that? What structure, what means do they perceive as the most efficient and effective way of accomplishing that? Is the Diamond Star System the most efficient and effective way? Today, the consensus seems to be "yes". In the year 2000 or 2003 or 2008? Speculating on that, to me, is not my end of things. That would require [speculating on] Steve Geppi's business. Speculating on what Steve Geppi intends to do over the next five or ten years would involve intruding on, impugning or judging his motives and intentions with no evidence to back up the observations. To me, that falls outside the parameters of polite conversation which--I hope--we are not going to do here.

MARDER: I agree with that sentiment, Dave, but now I have a question for you. When you published the *High Society* phonebook, you really were making a decision, whether it was consciously planned or not, to start putting part of your title's destiny into backlist. As an industry today, backlist is becoming increasingly a more important part of the business to a point where I have to say, from where I'm sitting, it looks like it's DC's primary focus. It's certainly becoming one of Image's focuses now that we have enough material to create a backlist because we've been around for five years. What are your feelings about that and do you think that the comic book marketplace is keeping up with this concept. This was a major topic of conversation at Wondercon, whether there's a hundred stores or whether there's four hundred stores that have supported the alternatives, but certainly of the 4000 stores it appears that half of them have never made an order from the TRU system. What are your feelings about that and what are your feelings about this being in part the salvation of the comic book marketplace.

SIM: [Laughs] What are my feelings? That's the fourth time that you've said, "What are my feelings?"

MARDER: Oh, I'm sorry, what are your *thoughts*?

SIM: [Laughter] I think it's not just backlist. It's interesting, because I'm not out in the environment, I don't go and do conventions anymore, this is the first time that I've heard the literary environment term being used.

MARDER: Really?

SIM: Yeah. So that means that it's obviously swept through...

MARDER: How do you *feel* about that [laughs]? I can't believe I did that.

SIM: Oh, no, no, everybody does.

MARDER: Yeah, but I usually don't, that's what's so funny [laughs].

SIM: Oh, okay.

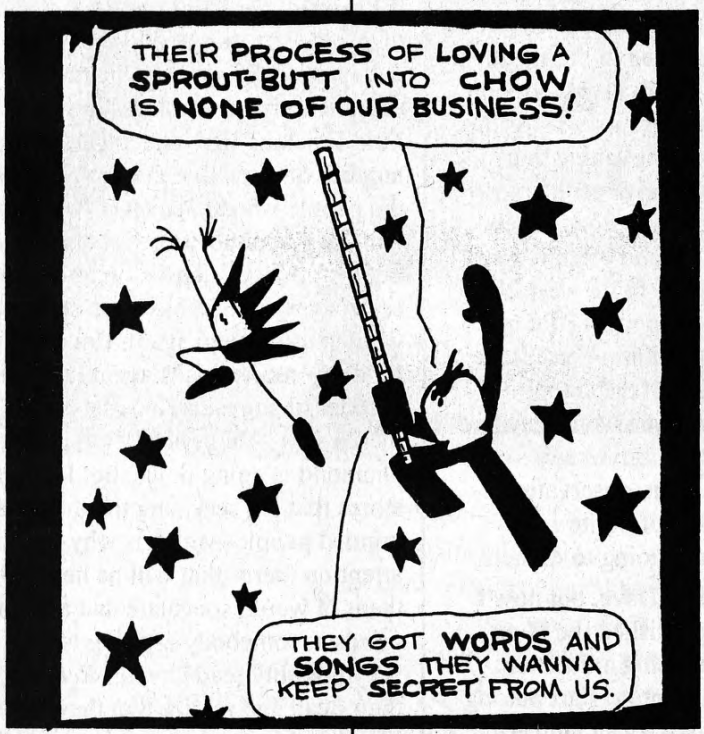
MARDER: And I certainly don't when I'm talking to you.

SIM: I think transformations are going on. That as things are getting smaller that there's a very distinct tendency on the part of the market, particularly on the part of the retailers, to perceive their place in comics and their individual importance and their collective importance as being this sort of fixed thing. If they are able to run their stores the way that they always have with a little finicking here and a little fine tuning there, there's a certain number of signs that they're beginning to get their ass kicked by the people who are saying "No, I wanna rethink this whole thing with no presuppositions whatsoever. I want to start a comic book store that is based on trade paperbacks, that is based on creator ownership, based on self publishing," in which case I would suspect and again, I'm not terribly well connected in the field any more, this is again just speculation, that probably the number of stores having that as their working theory are increasing. Numerically the number of stores ordering from Diamond is going down, but I would imagine that the number of stores that are servicing the interests of literate people, literary minded people--which is why the backlist term sort of caught my attention there--that will be happening without any awareness of them. I would speculate that a store starting up in that new mindset, somebody aspiring to be a Page 45 kind of store, would very possibly read *Comics Retailer*, but just sit there shaking their head and realize that they have nothing to say to people like this. It's not that they have anything against conventional retailers who are obsessed with silly things like getting Marvel to apologize for the Heroes World fiasco or with trying to anticipate how long the JLA are going to be hot before DC kills the franchise through overexposure -- and what is going to be hot in the immediate aftermath. It's just that -- having nothing to contribute to that debate -- they are forced to be content with running stores that are getting bigger, attracting more

customers and having better sales than what is going on with the conventional stores. Since they have nothing to piss and moan about they are naturally excluded from the dialogue among the conventional retailers who do little besides piss and moan.

MARDER: Have you ever--I'm sure Diamond must have offered you, because they seem to offer everybody--have you ever had them run one of their reports that shows a comparison between how many stores ordered the last issue of *Cerebus* and how many stores made an initial order of your last trade paperback?

SIM: Actually, I having crunched the questions in my head before even getting to the number crunching stage, I did fax a list of questions to our Diamond rep essentially wanting to know how many stores have ordered all of the trade paperbacks more than once in the last six months, and then again in the last year. Essentially, taking it as a given that probably a majority of our trade paperback sales are, somebody came into the store and said, "Can you get me a *Jaka's Story*?" and they turned around and said, "In addition to all of these Batman trade paperbacks that we want, we also want something called *Jaka's Story* and one copy, just one copy."


THEIR PROCESS OF LOVING A SPROUT-BUTT INTO CHOW IS NONE OF OUR BUSINESS!
THEY GOT WORDS AND SONGS THEY WANNA KEEP SECRET FROM US.

MARDER: Sure.

SIM: So what is the number of stores in the last six months, the last year, have reordered all ten books. I think it was within 72 hours of me faxing those questions to Glen [Folland], Marvel went back with Diamond and suddenly he had no time to do anything.

MARDER: Oh.

SIM: That's pretty typical. There's an answer there for me in and of itself in the skewed way that I see things. Something in the dying corporate environment had to shift dramatically in order to delay my getting an answer to that very simple question. My suspicious nature tells me that the answer to the question is: twelve stores have ordered all ten trade paperbacks in the last six months, the last year, more than once. Perhaps thirty stores -- fifty at the outside most. Even if it was seventy-five stores, it would then be sensible to engage Diamond's Telemarketing system for those seventy-five stores, to get Diamond to phone them once every two or three months and grease the wheels, provide rewards for what they are accomplishing on our behalf and to make ordering the trade paperbacks easier and leave the other 3,900 and some-odd stores to order individual books as customers request them.

MARDER: Or finding out which stores ordered seven and trying to figure out how to get them to ten.

SIM: [Laughs] Yeah, that would be interesting.

MARDER: I've gotta tell you, if there's any sort of by-product of this exclusivity, it has been, for us, that the numbers you get from Diamond are a hundred percent. You're not just trying to combine your Capital numbers and your Diamond numbers and try to get some sort of picture. I'm suggesting that even for you, particularly in the trade paperbacks, that it's still gonna be in the 90+ range, but I don't know. Still the numbers from them would have some sort of accuracy, but not like ours.

SIM: Yeah. This gets into very vague areas, but there is something wrong with counting. You never count your money when you're sitting at the table. If you're going to gamble, you gamble. If we get locked into a sense that having really accurate numbers is somehow going to affect anything, in a lot of ways I think it can be a distraction. I try not to let it distract me. If the secondary article of faith is that there are people out there that want to read this stuff, it will get to them. Something will evolve or mutate in between us and them in order to facilitate getting it there. The primary thing is producing the next page. You produce enough next pages on schedule, you get an issue, you put an issue out, you get revenue in.

MARDER: At the risk of sounding like somebody that's trying to recover from his earlier bobbling of the ball, numbers are scientific and numbers give you something to think about. If you're just going off of things that aren't numbers, you're really going on emotion and feeling.

SIM: Getting locked into a perception that accurate numbers reflect Reality as opposed to reality I think can be a major distraction from more important concerns. If the secondary article of faith at Aardvark-Vanaheim is that there are people out there who want to buy and read *Cerebus* and that--as a result --a series of means will evolve to get *Cerebus* to them; the first article of faith is producing the next page of the story. Produce enough pages and make them as good as Ger and I can and we have an issue. Print the issue and ship it on time and revenue comes in.

MARDER: You sound more like [Marcel] Duchamp every time I talk to you. You sound like when you're talking about that, you're just dropping the threads and watching them float [laughs].

SIM: I don't think so. Between hard scientific numbers and "emotion and feeling" there are whole realms of instinct and reality and Reality --larger wheels within still larger wheels -- with which both adherence to hard numbers and "emotion and feeling" are incompatible and which hard numbers and "emotion

and feeling" serve only to obscure, misrepresent and misguide. [Laughter] Well, I do that for a living [Marder laughs]. Saying things like that out loud surprises me as much as anyone, I have to admit. I begin the sentence thinking, "here comes an interesting helium balloon from deep inside my instinctive mind" and a misshapen lead pellet lands on the carpet. "Well," I think to myself, "there's another concept that doesn't lend itself to the spoken word." [Marder laughs]

FEATURE: Let's talk a bit more about backlist. People like Cold Cut have been carving out niche markets for themselves stocking retailers with backlist material. How important is backlist becoming to the overall business? Certainly it's important for you, Dave, because a reader needs to go back and read the trades to really get into *Cerebus*. How is it everywhere else? Larry, what do you see from your end? How important is this becoming?

MARDER: Backlist is becoming increasingly more important, on several levels. One of the reasons why folks are attracted to the Image Central deal is because they without question, at the end of the relationship, own their film negatives, which means that they can publish their own backlist. If there is anybody in this business that that has proven the importance of that, it's Will Eisner. Eisner is theoretically cashing a check every month for work that he did before World War II.

SIM: Well, before the Americans entered World War II.

MARDER: [Laughs] I think today's top creators, recognize the fact working at Marvel or DC might bring them a larger page rate than the revenue generated upon first publication of a creator-owned Image Central book, but, work-for-hire creations often cycle out of print. Future printings of all work-for-hire art is controlled by someone other than the people who created it. This is something that you were doing a lot of commentary on several years ago, in fact, Dave, I think it was a large part of your PRO/Con speech in '93. This is an important idea that needs to be absorbed by the creative community. The idea that you should own the work you create and that ultimately it will become a trade paperback serves twin purposes. First of all, it feeds the new readers so they can become familiar with the previous continuity without having to overcome in the financial obstacles of collecting expensive back issues..

SIM: Right.

MARDER: ...And two, it becomes a revenue stream that helps support your title as it goes through the ups and downs of the vagaries of the marketplace.

SIM: Yeah, I would say that's a very significant element. I know that when Don Simpson was having his big dust-up with Denis Kitchen about the film, could he get the film back for Megaton Man? I had gotten a package from Don of his fax communications with Kitchen Sink about the subject. [He was] essentially saying that he wanted the films back, they were his, and Denis saying that he talked it over with a number of people, among them Will Eisner, saying, "No, the films belong to Denis." When I was talking to Denis about it then after that, I said, "It would be really nice if this could be discussed. Then I could see some kind of point to the conventions and what not of 'what is the attitude in the comic book field?'" It seems to be one of the larger questions that's coming up. I mean, I'm still thinking about all of this stuff, I'm just not talking to anybody about it.

MARDER: And why would a publisher hang on to film it has no further publishing rights to?

SIM: Right, but larger than that, the overall umbrella seems to come down to ethics. When I looked up ethics in the dictionary it said, "generally accepted principles of rights and wrong in a given environment." I found it interesting as I considered, "are there any ethics in the comic book field?" [Marder laughs]. Well, it's funny phrased that way, but is there anything that is generally accepted in the comic book field to be right and generally accepted to be wrong. I would suspect one of the things that is holding us in this very confined holding pattern which the field has proven it can maintain for twenty years at a time, is that there is no interest or very little interest in ethical questions. The only interest is in "How do we get more readers?" Which really comes down to, "How can we all make more money?" It just seems a nicer way to say it. Do you need more readers or would it be okay with you if you just sold another 15,000 a month and then see what the reaction is in the eyes.

FEATURE: I would think for a lot of people it would come down to both. I mean, don't you want as many people to read *Cerebus*, just on a level of reading the book?

SIM: Oh sure, but that's not the question that I was posing. If you could sell another 15,000 and nobody ever read them would that interest you, and a lot of people's eyes would light up. Yet that would take us back into the unethical environment that we're all patting ourselves on the back for having gotten out of.

MARDER: Can't argue with that.

SIM: See, the questions aren't framed that way, and to me the priorities of what is worth discussing, all of the questions center around greed but finding a nice way to describe the greed. "How do we get more readers?" "How do we break out to the real world," which read sideways is "How do we fuck over all the comic book stores and make lots of money now that they've gotten us this far?" But of course it's not framed that way, so it

sounds like a very high ambition. Completely shorn of ethics, but a high ambition. As soon as we sit down and crack that particular philosopher's stone of "How do we ditch all of these comic book stores and get into Waldenbooks and everybody become a millionaire?"

MARDER: [Laughs] In that sinking market?

SIM: Yeah, you know that and I know that, but how many people do? Most creators still have it as the Holy Grail that they can go out to the mall and show the girl that they're trying to get into bed, "Look, there's my book over in Waldenbooks."

MARDER: Well that part is true [laughs]. And if not your girlfriend, it's at least your mother.

SIM: That's right, or your grandmother or your friends or your old high school teacher. The person isn't important, it's the sad motivation to me. Finding some validation in having your work on display beside the new Jackie Collins novel, next door to the local Baskin Robbins outlet and across the food court from the video store blowing out *Twister* tapes at $9.99. I really wonder at any sensibility that finds any kind of validation in that.

FEATURE: This is interesting, Alan Moore brought this up when I interviewed him for this issue...

SIM: Name dropper [laughs].

FEATURE: Giving credit where it's due, not trying to drop names.

SIM: I know.

FEATURE: What he was saying was in the eighties we were looking for "legitimacy" in the outside world and wanted to wanted to bring comics to mass acceptance and maybe that wasn't such a good goal to have, because the mass of things out there are shit.

SIM: Well yeah, I would certainly agree with that. One of the reasons that I find it very difficult to participate in most discussions having to do with the comic book field is that the people that you're talking to start with the premise that what you want to do is make millions of dollars. That's the best possible thing, a thing devoutly to be wished, now how do we go about making millions of dollars? I've never seen that as a particularly interesting goal or something worth applying any amount of mental energy to.

FEATURE: This brings up an interesting point you brought up the last time we did this. I guess it shows that I went back and reread that thing last night.

SIM: Well that makes one out of the three of us.

MARDER: That's exactly right, one [laughs].

FEATURE: Hey, someone had to. Dave, you were saying that "there is a natural schism between the comic book collectivist sensibility and the urge towards individualizing." Is this urge towards trying to be a millionaire part of that collectivist superhero sensibility which brings me to the question. Some people are saying that we're splitting off into two businesses: the superhero industry and the alternative industry, the alternative industry of course focusing on creating strong comic books over trying to become a millionaire with licensing, would you agree with that?

SIM: As questions go that has a lot in common with an omnibus bill that's trying to get passed through Congress and like, "Can I have an answer of yes or no for that?"

FEATURE: I'm not asking for a yes or no, you can pick it apart.

SIM: I think it's one of comics' current built-in problems that there is an assumption that those people who are inclined to--and can afford to--spend thousands of dollars every summer to stay at Marriotts and eat in restaurants and talk about the environment's future. Speaking as someone who did that for a period of time, I came to the conclusion that there was a lot of talking and almost no communication. I would suspect it's true on the retail end but I know its true on the creative end that unproductive creators tend to go to a lot of conventions and productive creators stay home and do their work. I enjoy the socializing but finally decided that I was going to be more satisfied getting my real work done than spending four days being reminded how little my own ideas and opinions reflect those of the consensus -- of how little consensus exists even in the portrayal of consensus at conventions. Five people in a bar talking about five different things but persuading themselves and each other that they are in basic agreement.

It seems very odd to me that an environment that has a central article of faith that it is --in 1997 --in real danger of falling below a subsistence level of existence is still spending thousands of dollars per person on airfare, hotel rooms and restaurant food every spring, summer and fall to get together and complain about it.

MARDER: Comic books aren't alone in that one.

SIM: Oh, I'm sure they're not [laughs]. I would hesitate to use that as any kind of rationale to say, "We're not the only stupid ones."

MARDER: I'm not saying it's a rationale [laughter].

FEATURE: Let's move to the second part of that bill, the talk of a split between the two industries. This was seen a little bit with the Spirits of Independence tour where we definitely saw some ground level interest in the alternative comics. There seems to be a natural contrast between audiences for that kind of show and those for big superhero conventions. You know, consider, say the attendance at the Bethesda Small Press Expo versus the Chicago Comicon for the different types of audiences some people see comics splitting off into. Do you see that kind of a split?

SIM: Yeah. I mean, I think it is possible. I think anyone who actually cares about comics, who went to one of the Spirits stops or APE or the Small Press Expo and then compared that to San Diego, is probably going to have the same impression that we all did. For one thing it was a lot of fun, the other thing well, "There's something wrong with [big conventions], [they're] broken, and [they're] not fixable." That's probably just a luxury of something starting new. If we had kept on with the Spirits stops and then figured out how to make them bigger and bigger every year for twenty years, I'm sure we would rival San Diego or Chicago for brain deadening self indulgence or whatever you want to call it.

I'm coming to the conclusion that what benefits there are to be had from these environments, whether you're talking about the Spirits stops or whether you're talking about a trade show or the San Diego Con or any of those things, it is not a patch, it is not in the ballpark anywhere near to the benefits of doing the next page. I can get five or six pretty darn good *Cerebus* pages done in the length of time it takes San Diego to go through the trade show and the convention itself. If I had to weigh them on the two hands, there's no question. You go to San Diego and there's 18,000 people, or if they're lying it's 15,000 people. Something interesting will happen. I'll have some interesting conversation that will probably go in an interesting direction. I will make contact with somebody that might lead to something or I will have the pleasure and the satisfaction of having an engaging conversation with these seven people on successive nights. Weighing that in the one hand and looking at my part of seven *Cerebus* pages being done on the other hand, there's no competition.

MARDER: For you.

SIM: For me.

MARDER: You aren't arguing that a creator coming up through the ranks shouldn't go to conventions, are you?

SIM: I'm not sure that there really are any ranks. I think that there was a peculiar time period where I decided to really advance the cause of self-publishing or at least try to get it across as lucidly as I can and see what happens. I' not really certain that...well it depends on what kinds of ranks you're talking about.

MARDER: Actually, maybe 'ranks' was an imprecise choice of words, but consider the young creator, who has an excellent book and is trying to break through the clutter. That person has to meet and make connections with the people in the industry that can open the most doors for their book. .

SIM: That's a very tough call. Is it necessary to get out there and get connected with people in order to make things happen? I'm not sure. I'm not saying it's not true, but I'm not altogether convinced of that. Did Bone's success happen because Jeff went to a lot of trade shows and conventions, or would Bone have had a success just by making it happen? Just keep the book coming out.

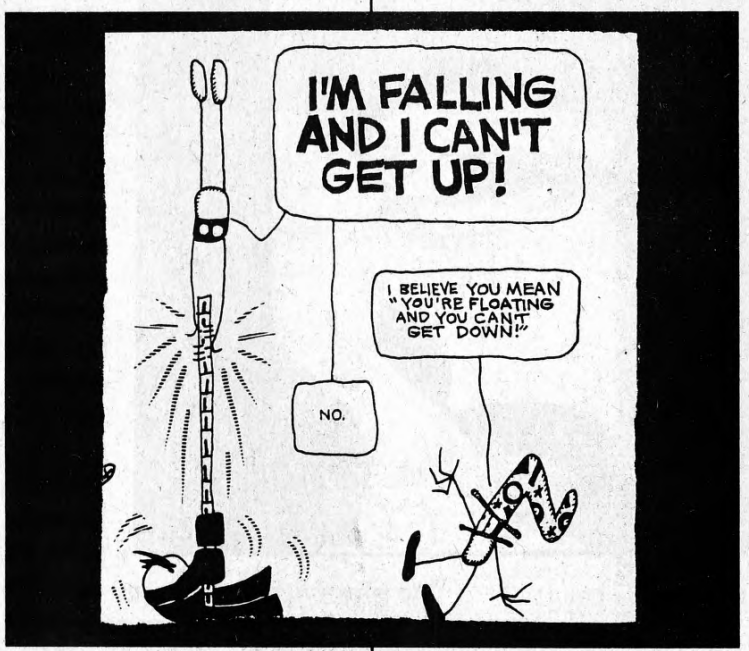
MARDER: Well, until there's an Earth One and an Earth Two where you can do a scientific experiment isolating the two, one doesn't really know. I think that there is something to what you said. Let's just stay on the subject of Jeff momentarily. Did the progress that Jeff made happen on the floor, or did it happen in restaurants and bars?

SIM: Or did it happen when people got home and read them?

MARDER: Any of the above, but even the idea that they got home and read them, they came into contact with them by being given away or hearing from somebody else, "Hey, that's really cool." Some kind of cluster effect from the community.

SIM: Well, that would dovetail with the "How many stores are there?" argument. There could very well be only 20 stores out there that are making Bone happen and consequently, it seems that that would be the environment where it happens. I am not really an advocate of anything anymore. Again, each person has to make up their own mind. Here's what it's going to cost you to get to the San Diego Con, put a roof over your head, pay for your little 4' x 5' selling space. No one, least of all Larry or myself is going to say, "Now as soon as you do that, you're guaranteed success." I don't know if the opposite holds true as well. Both of us could foresee that somebody might just be darn good enough to have an impact on the market and they're gonna be better off saving the money that they're gonna spend on plane fare, hotel accommodations, et cetera.

MARDER: Well, I think that is the gamble that people take. But I think that getting back to your original point, because I've sort of been mulling over it since you said it, there is a line, and I know that I've crossed over it myself on the *Beanworld* end, there is a line where you're going to conventions and you don't really have anything new [Sim laughs]. You're there because you're there because you're there, and this is not a line that I've crossed over, because obviously I'm there for other business reasons, but there is a point where you see people who have become non-productive who are creating things for the convention--be it an ashcan or a poster, or something to sell--because they know that no matter how bad they fuck up, they still have a hard core of 500 people, 5,000 people, wherever your cult is, and you can sell those people anything. So, you go out and create something and that's gonna financially carry you through the next two weeks or the next 90 days. It depends who you are and what you're talking about selling and at that point you have become something else, but certainly not a proactive cartoonist. And we all know who these people are.



SIM: Millions would differ with you on that because there's such a momentum to the idea that this is where the success happens. I mean, again we will be very cautious to avoid actual names here...

MARDER: I didn't mention anybody's name [laughs].

SIM: That's right, you didn't say anybody either, and we're thinking of the same guys I'm sure. You don't produce anything, but you go to the conventions and you make a lot of money there, you make a lot of money when you do put something out, you get talked up in *Wizard Magazine*, *The Comics Buyer's Guide*, because everybody got to meet you and you're a really nice guy. Everybody wishes you all the success in the world. It becomes sort of a name. Apart from the name, it seems to take about two years for people to actually say, "Well, it's two years later and the guy's put out two issues. We cut him some slack last year, but this year we're cutting him less slack." And then the third year they cut him less slack still and then the end of the fourth year they go, "Oh well, we'll really like it when it comes out." Which, again, that to me is on the side of creator ethics. Are there generally accepted creator community ethics of right and wrong behavior and I think you can come up with a pretty short list of things that creators generally believe to be right and wrong.

FEATURE: What's your short list?

SIM: Mine? Not exploiting other creators with work-made-for-hire. Gerhard has the right to publish any pages he's worked on, we jointly own the artwork, we share equally in the profits, Bob Burden can reprint the Flaming Carrot cross-over in issue 104 and compensate or not compensate Ger and I to whatever degree he chooses. Getting the book out on time.

MARDER: Making your solicitations. If you say you have monthly book, publish it monthly. If you say you have a quarterly book, publish it quarterly. If you say you have a once every other year book, publish it once every other year. But soliciting for a monthly book that only comes out twice a year, that's terribly wrong.

SIM: Again, that's not generally accepted. It might be generally accepted, but nobody actually changes the behavior, or the vast majority don't change the behavior.

FEATURE: You are productive or you're not productive, but be what you say you are.

SIM: Right. See that's the funny thing about ethics [laughs]. It's not what you say, it's what you do.

FEATURE: Moving into the general comic book atmosphere right now. It seems to me that recently we've seen more of a movement towards creator owned and creator driven comic books taking more of a front seat, if you will, in the market. The success of books like *Astro City, Bone, Stray Bullets, Leave It To Chance*--and I'm purposely throwing out books that are both published and self published--seems to be becoming more prominent. Do you think we're seeing this type of comic starting to dominate over the custodial atmosphere that we've had for ages now where characters are more important than creators. Are creators finally becoming a more dominant force for the readership, or are the characters still fairly dominant over the market.

SIM: I don't know, Larry do you want to try that one?

MARDER: No. But, to be honest with you, I feel, I think that what's really going on right now...

SIM: No, Larry, you can feel, I'm the one who thinks.

MARDER: (Laughs) No, I'm not really feeling here either. The answer is, I don't know. What's going on at Image right now, particularly with what Valentino's doing, these are interesting experiments. We're taking self publishers into our system and publishing them. We take these small self-publishers and provide them four-color, full page solicitations in the front of the catalog. Plus, they are paid when Image gets paid. When they were tiny self-publishers, they were standing at the back of the pay line. Now they stand in front. The inability to garner proper marketing and timely payment are two of the largest hindrances small self publishers face. These are the things that in the past

made self-publishers depressed and unable to produce--I'm not saying that we won't create myriad of new problems, I'm sure that we will--but the old problems, on a certain level, have disappeared. And so, what happens when a small publisher who has a small book that sells between five and ten thousand copies, what happens when they get the big marketing push, their press releases get published, they get paid? Those were the terrors that so discouraged me ten years ago when I was floundering with *Beanworld*, before I got sucked into the business end of things. This experiment is different. We'll have to wait another two years before we can judge whether it has been a success or not. We've been through a cycle now where Jeff Smith came to Image Comics for specific reasons. The reasons that he came to Image Comics, those things changed and he left, and he took his film negs with him. You know, we shook hands and we parted ways. This is far different from my experience of attempting to get my *Beanworld* films out of Eclipse's possession.

SIM: [Laughs] I'll give you that one!

MARDER: So we're not dealing with the traditional problems that make people depressed and unable to draw.

SIM: Well, I suppose it depends on which "we" we're talking about. I would agree with you that the situation with Jeff and Image was significant in a number of ways that haven't been discussed, which is apt because a thoroughgoing discussion of what it was-- like the discussion of Steve Geppi's intentions with Diamond -- would require impugning or judging Jeff's motives and intentions without evidence to back it up. Again, outside the boundaries of polite conversation. But, if we just stay within the confines of the factual, it was interesting to me that Jeff was the one who leveled the accusation at me of starting a self-publishing movement and he accidentally started his own self-publishing movement [Marder chuckles] of self-publishers going to Image. And then Jeff took it to another level entirely by leaving Image relatively soon after he arrived which, to me, accomplished a very important thing that probably won't be perceived for a number of years as being as important as it really was. Jeff and Image demonstrated that Image was different for the exact reason that you can go to Image and then leave without suffering any consequences, without having to go to court, without wondering what happens to your backlist, how you're going to get your films back of the issues published under the Image imprint. As a self-publisher, I also admire the fact that -- to whatever degree going to Image was perceived as a self-publishing movement in some quarters - to "follow" Jeff you have to go in and come back out. Until someone else does that, Jeff remains a unique individual -- the only one who has done it.

MARDER: That's right.

SIM: The mere fact that that was possible with Image, that it has been proven that Image genuinely functions on that open-door basis is an enormous leap forward in the ongoing history of creators' rights. Until we see that happen anywhere besides Image, the assumption has to be that Image is the only place that has moved to a more ethical level of publishing. They don't let just anyone "crash on their couch awhile", but those who do aren't tied up in the terms of a lease when they decide to find a place of their own.

MARDER: I think that's the other thing that's going on within Image, and we haven't even touched beyond the tip of the iceberg on this process yet is the idea of Image Central as a "halfway house" for Marvel/DC creators. Providing assistance to big-time work-for-hire creators that now want to work on properties they own. Increasingly I get contacted by creators who really want to ultimately self-publish. They openly state, from the start, "This is only an interim step for me. I want to learn how to publish myself." But because they have been so been so protected, rejected or persecuted by the power structures of the big work-for-hire corporations that when dollars comes to doughnuts, they really don't know very much about how the comic book industry works. So, I've been saying, "Come to Image, we can be your halfway house to freedom."

SIM: "We're not gonna keep it a secret on how all of these things are done."

MARDER: Right. We'll work with you on your ads, but they're your ads. We'll work with you on your press releases, but they're your press releases. You write them. We'll edit them, I'll certainly put in my two cents, but whether your book really makes it or not is based on your effort, not mine. What I'll be the most happy about will be when somebody from the big two walks away and establishes their own book. A lot of these guys want to work in color, so the financial mechanics are more complex than working in black and white which is far easier to learn by yourself.

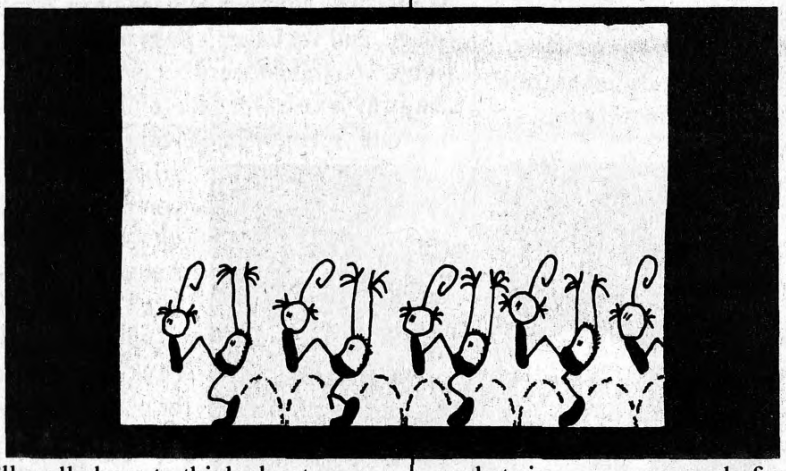
SIM: Yeah, I can certainly see that. Again, it's just not of interest to the environment, which is no big surprise given what does interest the environment.

MARDER: Yeah, and in fact there are these perplexing questions coming out of the environment, "Well, why does Image seem to not support this book?" or "Why did this press release read this way and that press release read that way? They don't seem to be coming from the same people." And they're not.

SIM: Yeah, and that's actually the point.

MARDER: It is the point to me, and it is the point, I think, to the Image partners to make that opportunity available. But like I said, it's too early to tell still. There's stuff that hasn't even been announced yet, so, again, ask me in two years whether I think this experiment was a success or not.

SIM: Yeah. I'm not going to pressure you to comment on this, but as an outsider, I am curious about Mike Richardson's reaction to Matt Wagner taking *Mage II* to Image. I'm being cautious here so I don't step too far outside of the boundaries of polite conversation. It could be a defining moment in what Dark Horse is, tying in with my own view that creator-friendly is being redefined by events in the field with very little -- actually *no* discussion -- going on in the comics press, in the stores or at conventions. Unless DC and Marvel and Dark Horse can demonstrably match the structure implied by what happened with Jeff Smith and Image, they are going to rank very low on the totem pole as corporate vehicles for creators who own their own creative properties. If you can't get in at Image you'll really have to think about your second choices. And for a creator who is aware of contractual ramifications, Sirius might have more to offer than DC or Marvel. This is really tip-toeing around the boundaries of polite conversation since each deal is considered the personal business of the creator and the company. Is Sirius like Image or is Sirius like DC? Is Sirius like Image with some creators and like DC with others? Asking is not polite, so there's no answer. Indisputable, however, as a central consideration is "who owns the film?" Image's answer is "the creator does". As Larry points out, the film is the creator's backlist and owning it or not owning it is central to whether the work stays in print or not. It's unfortunate that no one is interested in talking about this and it's one of the big reasons I decided "enough is enough" relative to conventions and other personal appearances and industry convocations. If no one is going to talk about ethics -- what is right and what is wrong -- why go?



The environment is not interested in discussing right and wrong. They're interested in...I don't know what they're interested in. "Deploring", I think, more than anything else. They just like to go through the list of things they collectively deplore, starting with Rob Liefeld's artwork and spreading out and down from there.

MARDER: [Laughs] You sure you weren't at Wondercon?

FEATURE: Dave, the last time we did this you said that "The Titanic sinks. Any time you try to build a ship that big you're tempting the gods, tempting the fates." Have we done that in our current market, especially in the sense of having a distributor that is larger than a direct market distributor has been?

SIM: There, I was really talking about the San Diego Con and Trade Show in 1993 or so, the last Diamond Trade Show and the mistake that I think is implied with lumping gum cards and role-playing games and Magic cards and comic books into one big inglorious pile--and having increasing the size of the pile and the elements making it up as a perceived worthwhile ambition. There are a lot of questions implied by Diamond itself but it is still just a conduit, it is still just a means. Structurally are they big enough to handle everything that they're attempting to do now that Marvel has been added back into the mix? Can they maintain their efficiency without a competitor of comparable size? To me, that's more of a retailer question and will probably be answered over an unknowable period of time -- and will be answered by each individual retailer relative to *his or her perceived needs and* requirements. Considering that Marvel and DC and Dark Horse and Image's volume of sales continue to decline, I'd say the environment passed the potential "Titanic" metaphor--in terms of total market size --a year or so before the exclusives were signed. Since they've been signed the market is more likely of "Queen Mary" proportions and is well on its way to becoming "Love Boat" sized. (Laughs) I don't think the "Love Boat" is likely to "tempt the fates".

MARDER: You know, the analogy that I always use is that I feel like I'm in a kayak in some very, heavy whitewater, and *there is no time to analyze how we got here. We're just* struggling to keep the kayak right-side-up! I don't worry about how we got here anymore. We're here in the heavy whitewater and that is that. Some of the actions that got us here, Image participated in, and others Image didn't. But, ultimately, it is the system that we have today and yes, it's having problems, there's no question about that. We've got a large distributor that downscaled to stay competitive and then, ironically, the entities it was striving to compete with, it ended up absorbing. They downsized yet had to increase the volume of product it needs to move each week. The machine definitely needs some repairing and upgrading , but I don't think it's hopeless. I don't think it's hopeless as far as being able to distribute the books to the stores that exist. If you're asking is the economic system that built itself up around the superhero genre sinking still? I tend to think the answer's yes.

SIM: I think what is sometimes overlooked is the artificial spike in growth in 1993 -- which was the culmination of the multiple-cover *Spider-Man #1* that Todd did, the multiple-covered *X-Men #1* that Jim Lee did, the "Death of Superman" multiple-packaging, the million-copy sales on the first few Image books--and Capital and Diamond's mistaken reaction that it was the breakthrough year. It was Year One of Exponential Expansion.

Capital built their extravagant corporate headquarters with the alternating Capital and American flags out the front, Diamond acquired the palatial Timonium address. All very upscale and ready for Year Two and Three of Exponential Expansion. Whether the Marvel/Heroes World deal had happened or not, by the time the numbers were showing an artificial spike in '93 and "business as usual" in '94 and '95, both Capital and Diamond were realizing "this town ain't big enough for both of us".

Because of the infrastructure that both had built in the optimism of '93, it became clear that they would need all of the comics business to maintain it. All of the comics business just to maintain a scaled-down version of the '93 infrastructure. Let me cryptically assert that the environment's consciousness learned a valuable lesson in containing the physical parameters -- when it's time to exhale, it's also possible to sneeze: to get rid of a lot of impurities very, very quickly. I'd speculate that the environment is contemplating another sneeze, but wants to assess how much of the baby went out with the bathwater last time--when I mix a metaphor, boy, it's a real stomach-turner. At this point, given the parameters of polite conversation, it's still an open question as to whether all of the comic-book business in the world is sufficient to maintain Diamond's scaled-back '93 infrastrucure. Because it is Steve Geppi's personal business and because he isn't required to share the hard information with the rest of us all we can do is wait and see what he chooses to do and what, as a result of what he chooses to do, happens.

MARDER: That's correct. I agree with the theory that you put forward. I worry sometimes, "Is this hindsight rationalization on my part?" But, then again, no one is arguing that Marvel's purchase of Heroes World had anything to do with why people stopped reading comics and why stores began failing. But, looking back I really do believe the old system was failing at the end of 1994. What if Heroes World hadn't been purchased by Marvel? What if Heroes World, Friendly Frank's, Styx, Andromeda, and Multi-Book were still out there as struggling economic entities, unable to pay their bills to publishers? I feel--and I think this one is a gut feeling more than a thinking--that the system truly was on the verge of collapse anyway. I think that the one thing that this downsizing didn't do is take a lot of publishers with it. What if publishers were still shipping books to a half-dozen regional distributors simultaneously even though they weren't getting paid? That's what we were doing at the end of 1994, that's for sure. Just knowing how hurt some people were by the rapidity of what happened with Capital, that if it had been a much slower, lingering death and every publisher had continued shipping their goods to every regional distributor we would have diffused our dwindling resources even more. I think that the smaller publishers, and even some of the larger publishers too, would have been seriously crippled, and perhaps died with the regional distributors. But again, that's one of those theories where you need Earth One and Earth Two to prove the hypothesis.

SIM: Because so much falls outside of the boundaries of polite conversation, because so much hard information is hidden, I tend to believe that results imply motivation -- that motivation can only be judged accurately after the fact. I think if something has a "right" motivation behind it, it keeps going. Sometimes it thrives and flourishes and sometimes it just endures and survives. Motivation is hidden because everyone knows how to "play the game". Everyone says, "I really care about the comic-book medium. I just want to give something back to the industry that has always meant so much to me." No creator in his right mind is going to set up at the San Diego Con and say "Me? I'm just here to milk all you losers for my rent money until I close my film deal." And yet, it is easy to see -- after the fact -- the creators who had that as their primary motivation, because they don't last very long, the perception of them changes. "Riding high in April, shot down in May" as Frank Sinatra put it. Hey, "That's Life."

MARDER: Actually, Dave, I think that some people are right on the edge of actually admitting that that is their intention. Some, but I don't want to say any names either [laughs].

SIM: Well, hey, there's another degradation of the environment right there isn't it? "I really care about the comic-book medium. I just want to give something back to the industry that has always meant so much to me." "My sales are down to what?!? Fuck you, you bunch of losers -- I'm going to Hollywood where they know what a genius I am."

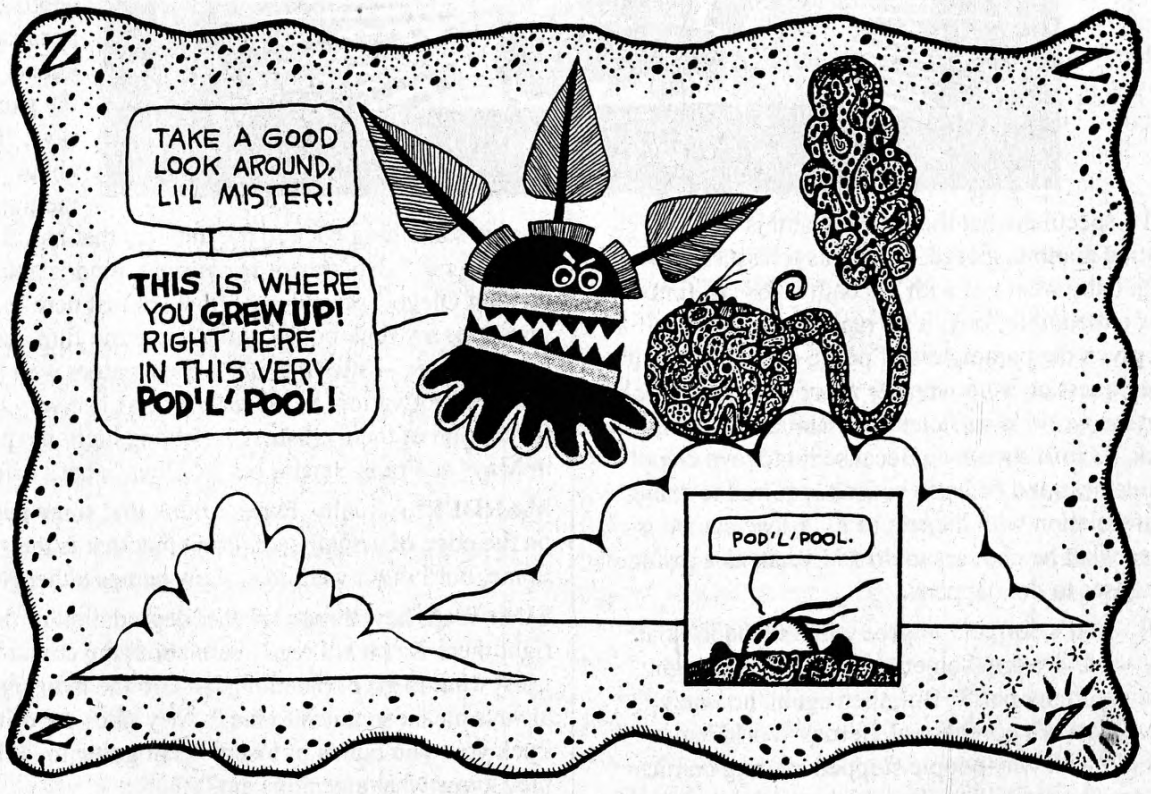
I anticipated or at least suspected that some sort of changes were going to take place around September, 1995--since that date is four years and three months this side of the year 2000 as *Cerebus* #300 is four years and three months on the other side of the year 2000; March, 2004. (Laughs) I really thought it was going to be just something that affected me personally--not the whole Marvel buying Heroes World/ Diamond going exclusive with DC. Well, that's as much as I'm going to say about that. I don't want to read too much into it, I've just added it to the pile of strange symmetries attached to the *Cerebus* project over lo these twenty years.

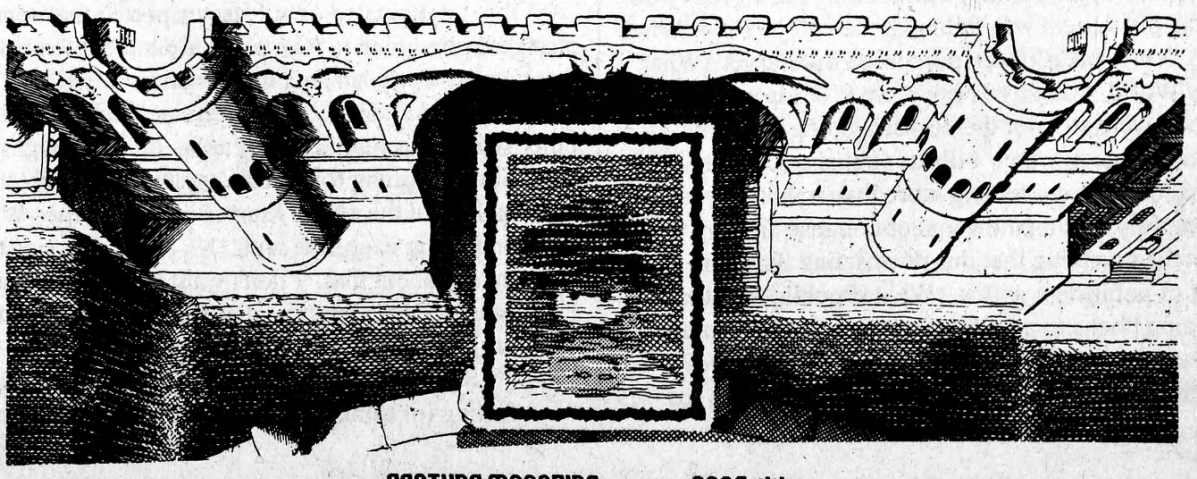
Sideways from that, Larry, I was wondering what you were feeling (or thinking) when the real life Image configuration

started changing at, what I imagine would be, a ninety degree angle to its *Beanworld* incarnation-in-progress? And if that contributed in any major way to your revived "when I'm out of here" assertion -- which I can't remember being quite so... firmly attached?...to one of your public statements in the last two years or so. (Parenthetically do you agree with Alan Moore that it is reality's job to imitate art and that reality 'let you down' in this case?)

MARDER: [Laughs] Well, Alan certainly has a point. His assertion strangely echoes (in my mind anyway) Levi-Strauss' notion that myths actually communicate with other myths via human beings. And I think of Duchamp's peculiar statements contained in his 1957 talk at the Western Round Table of Modern Art, titled "The Creative Act. " Here he said, "To all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing..." I have always endorsed the idea that artists are mediums getting their impulses from...elsewhere. In my experience all of those things have been true. I've also consistently had experiences that verge on being shamanistic. When I need a tool, or a book, or a piece of information--it just appears. Out of nowhere. Just like that. I stopped being surprised or shocked about such things well over 20 years ago.

I'm not sure precisely how to answer your question, but let me try. Regarding the "baby-beans-as-the-Image Partners" storyline juxtaposed with the awful reality of Liefeld's expulsion from Image and the subsequent lawsuits etc., all I can say is that from a *Beanworld* point of view--this story just didn't want to be told at this time. *Beanworld*, which is a myth that uses me as its medium, wanted me to tell the story of the return of Mr. Spook's fork. *Beanworld* didn't want me mucking around with maturation process of the baby beans. I foolishly kept insisting that this is what was supposed to happen next, but *Beanworld* frowned and prevented me from going to places where it didn't want me to go. I grope around in the dark "labyrinth beyond time and space" and discover bits and pieces of it, but *Beanworld* decides what it wants me to know and when it wants me know it. If, as Alan asserts, "it is reality's job to imitate art" then reality didn't let *Beanworld* down, reality assisted *Beanworld* in communicating *Beanworld's* demands so that even I could see that this wasn't the time or place for me to document this part of the myth. [Laughs] In struggles like this, *Beanworld* always wins. Always.





BATTON LASH

Batton Lash is universally regarded as one of the nicest guys in comics. He's one of those guys that everybody knows and knows everybody, yet when you suggest that he's a Nexus, he calmly replies, "No, I'm a yenta." Whether Nexus or yenta, Lash is certainly one of the most approachable, knowledgeable, and supportive people in this industry. Considering this, it is unusual that so many people are unfamiliar with his work, which is as funny, intelligent, and multi-faceted as he is.

Lash is the writer and artist of* Wolff and Byrd, Counselors of the Macabre, *a self-published comic book, and comic strip. His strip has been seen consistently in* Comics Buyer's Guide *and* The National Law Journal, *while the comic has enjoyed a run of sixteen issues thus far.

Charles Brownstein and Lash sat down on an early evening in May and discussed the origins of* Wolff and Byrd, *Lash's intentions with the book, and the state of the comics industry in the following interview.

FEATURE: What role did comics play in your early life? How did you become attracted to the art form?

BATTON LASH: Charles, that's a great question. I can't honestly tell you because they were always there. I think my earliest memory was my mother buying me *Superman* and *Detective* comics. My mom told me of how she bought *Batman* #1 when she was a kid, so maybe she just figured "I read comics as a kid, so my child shall now read comics." It could have been something like that. But I can't honestly tell you what attracted me because they were always there and I always liked them.

I remember being very, very young and I had a deck of cheap playing cards. When I say they were very cheap, there was nothing printed on the back. The cards had images on the front, but the backs were blank. I distinctly remember drawing my own comic on the back of those cards. So I had a fifty two page comic book [laughs]. I think it might have been my version of the comics I had been reading. I must have been six or seven. So the creative impulse goes back that far.

FEATURE: Were comics something that your siblings outgrew and that you were expected to outgrow? What kept you with the artform through your adulthood?

LASH: To answer the sibling question, my brother and three sisters were absolutely not interested in comics. That's the one I can never figure out, what made *me* so interested and my siblings uninterested in comics. To this day I can't figure it out. But, I never thought of comics as a thing I would outgrow and I never had *that* pressure from my parents.

I think my contemporaries will probably understand this: I was born in 1953, so when I mention that I was six or seven when I started reading comics and doing my own comics, I remember the Mort Weisinger *Superman* comics. Maybe five years down the road the Marvel age took off. Then when I became a teenager, some of Marvel comics were becoming "sophisticated"--at least sophisticated in terms of the storytelling and maybe some of the subject matter. Then in my teenage years there was *Warren* magazine--*Creepy* and *Eerie*. So you see where I'm going with this. I never thought that I was gonna outgrow comics, because it seemed that comics were aging with me. Then, I guess at this point, about 1970 or so, the bottom seemed to fall out of everything. I think that's where I remember my first "disillusionment" with comics. It took me a while, but then it dawned on me *I'm* the only one aging around here.

It did seem that they were growing up with you, but then suddenly the ginger was taken out of all that. So what can I say? I was very optimistic that comics would always be a part of my life, but I didn't even think of things in terms of industry recessions in those days, or people getting fired, whole companies going under. You don't think of those things until you begin to have your own life and then you see that things aren't too rosy.

FEATURE: What role did the undergrounds play in your creative development?

LASH: I'm almost embarrassed to say this, but I was the typical guy from Brooklyn, meaning I never left Brooklyn. Manhattan was always *the city*. It was always across the water and I had no reason to go there. Brooklyn was my turf. Now, having said that, I was fifteen or sixteen during the peak years of the undergrounds. I rarely saw them because there were certainly no head shops where I lived. On my rare visits to Manhattan I would see a head shop and see these odd comics. I saw some of the *Zap Comix* and I remember thinking, "Wow, what are these?" However, there was a

newsstand on King's Highway in Brooklyn that carried *Rat Magazine,* which was a counterculture tabloid. They had comics in there. So I had a passing knowledge of Crumb, and S. Clay Wilson, and Spain. I had seen their work and it was odd. I didn't quite understand it and it certainly wasn't as polished as the comics I was reading at the time. I don't remember being totally influenced by it, but I wasn't put off by it. It was just this odd section of life that I was unfamiliar with at that point. Thinking back, maybe I was a bit intimidated by the underground cartoonists, much like being a straight arrow in school and hanging with the kids who smoked and drank. I didn't start to get into the undergrounds until I went to the School of Visual Arts and hooked up with classmate John Holmstrom. He was a big Crumb fan and turned me on to Crumb. He gave me the full treatment, lent me all the stuff, then I began to seek it out. But I would say I liked the alternative that the undergrounds showed. I mean, most of it was junk, but the good stuff was really, really good.

FEATURE: When did you know that you were going to be a cartoonist? Was this before or after you entered SVA?

LASH: Oh jeez, I always wanted to be a cartoonist. I wasn't exactly sure how one went about it, but very early on I was aware that people drew comics, that's what I wanted to do. So I always had that desire. Now that wasn't encouraged too much. A little kid says, "I want to be a cartoonist," and the reaction is as if he said, "I want to be a subversive agent for the KGB." It was "*No!* That's not what you want to do." [Brownstein laughs] It didn't come from my parents, it came from advisors at school, even other classmates, parents of my friends. So in the back of my mind it was, "Gee, this really gets a knee jerk reaction from people." I always wanted to be a cartoonist and do comic books. Comic strips, I thought, were okay. But the whole comic book format really appealed to me. The sequential panels, and the turning the page, and moving it to its conclusion, appealed to me at a very early age and that's what I wanted to do . That bug was always with me.

It seemed that most of the bios that I had read of comic book artists had always mentioned School of Visual Arts. I sent for a catalog, checked it out, and enrolled in SVA after high school.

FEATURE: Tell me about the experience you had at SVA? Who were some of the people you met, what were some of the things you learned there?

LASH: [Chuckles] Well, after a lifetime of wanting to be a cartoonist, I learned I wasn't gonna be a cartoonist! It was a whole new world. I was a guy who rarely left Brooklyn and now here I was going to Manhattan every day, so that had a major effect on me. By the end of my first year, it was, "Who the hell needs Brooklyn? This is New York and New York is the greatest city in the world!" So that ultimately transformed me. You couldn't even keep me in Brooklyn after that. It was a turning point in my life because it exposed me to many different people and my whole perspective on everything changed.

As far as people I met, I met John Holmstrom on my first day in school. He went on to create *Punk Magazine* and is the publisher of *High Times* now. He was a profound influence on me. At that point in my life I had never met anyone like him before. He was into comics. We both realized we had this undying admiration and appreciation of Steve Ditko, so that was the icebreaker for the both of us and we became friends. The first two years I was there we were "thick as thieves." I guess he's the closest thing I've ever had to a mentor in my life, which is odd, because he's only a year older than me. He introduced me to a lot of things which included the undergrounds. Even things like plays by [Eugene] Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. Certainly he was a big rock fan, so with him I saw bands I had never heard of before. He had an apartment around the corner from the school so I'd go there a lot with him. He was, and I'm sure he still is a very articulate, smart, opinionated person and I was a little bit in awe of him because he was so unlike anyone I had ever met before.

There was a drawing instructor there whose name was Jim Kearns. He was an illustrator and a hell of an artist. I was drawing all my life, but sitting in his class was like starting from scratch because I saw I was going about drawing the wrong way. It was an experience.

Of course Kurtzman and Eisner came to teach in Fall of '73 and by the Spring of '74 I was convinced I wasn't gonna be a cartoonist because of that year experience. So there's a can of worms for you.

FEATURE: I'll break out the can opener. Tell me about those Eisner and Kurtzman classes.

LASH: Well, we were all pretty excited because as my first year of SVA was winding down I had met a few people who went to the school to get into comics. At the time I started there, there were no cartooning classes, but they were going to rectify that. So in the fall of '73 they were gonna have cartooning classes and hired Will Eisner and Harvey Kurtzman. Now, I knew who they were. Certainly I knew who Kurtzman was. Eisner...well, you gotta remember, this was the early seventies, so *The Spirit* wasn't as available as it is now. Only bits and pieces of it were reprinted but I

remembered the Harvey 25 cent *Spirit* that came out in 1966 and it made a major impression on me.

So in that fall they had started the class and it was an eye opener. I wouldn't say Will was a tough teacher, he was friendly but he was absolutely no-nonsense. He was always very nice, very gracious, but he wouldn't lie to someone. If he didn't like what you were doing, he'd tell you and like all good teachers he'd suggest and advise how to improve that situation. Well, Holmstrom and I were both gung ho. We must have been the bane of everyone in that class because we were so into it. Holmstrom made strides--while it seemed like I couldn't do anything right. But, I always got the impression, Kurtzman especially, that even though he was shooting everything I was handing in, he liked that I kept churning out stuff to show him. I wouldn't miss a class. Every week I'd have something for them, which might include sketches or finishes, whatever the assignment was, but I have to say, I don't think they were overly impressed with my work.

ER . . . I CANT CALL HER NOW . . . LOOK! COUNT DRACULA'S READY TO SEE US!
HE'S READY TO COUNSEL A VAMPIRE-- BUT TOO SCARED TO CALL A MODEL . . . UNBELIEVABLE!
DO WHAT YOU WANT, BYRD . . . SPEAKING OF CALLS, I NEVER RETURNED TOBY BASCOE'S. LET ME SEE IF HE'S WORKING LATE . . .

Both of them were more than nice to me. Harvey, took a liking to Holmstrom and me. He invited us up to his Mount Vernon home to chat. I always got the feeling Harvey never knew what to do with me. He always said I was an idea man and liked my concepts--it was always the finished artwork he didn't like. But he was always very nice to me. It's funny, between the both of them, Will was more the teacher who was, like I say, no nonsense and there to instruct. Harvey was a little more relaxed. He sort of approached it as a camp counselor. On Harvey's very first day in class he walked in with a six pack of Pepsi [chuckles]. He told the class, "Anyone who wants one take one." So he always had that "open door" policy. We were *all* very young and some of the students in the class may have been a little more rambunctious than he would have liked. But in *Will's* class, there was no question. "Class be seated," that was the implication. Harvey was a very gentle person, and unfortunately that was a signal for someone who wants to be a pest to go crazy.

After that semester was over, I was convinced I was not gonna be a cartoonist, even though I passed those classes. (I think Will and Harvey passed everyone, unless the student didn't show up.) So it's not like I failed, but *I* thought I failed because I did not get their "approval." They thought, "Well, he's a nice guy and is certainly a good pupil, but we don't see any promise in this guy." That was kind of discouraging, but at the same time the comics industry was going through this strange depression. At the time there was a paper shortage, companies were going under, people were complaining that mom and pop stores were closing up so the comics weren't as available anymore. Marvel and DC were churning out tons of titles, recycling old plots, and it seemed like all the interesting talents had left the business. Any of this sound familiar? The most significant was when Will and Harvey had professionals come to lecture in the class. Most of them were saying there wasn't gonna be a comics industry by 1980. Again, all this dovetailed as I was taking video classes, I was doing a lot of writing, playwriting specifically, so my interests, after twenty years of wanting to be a cartoonist, changed. Suddenly a whole new world opened up to me of writing and plays and filmmaking, and things like that, that by the time that semester ended it occurred to me, "Well, maybe I wasn't cut out to be a cartoonist, but I'm still a creative person." I was very interested in filmmaking and playwriting. Will encouraged me. He had seen one of the things I had written and directed and said, "This is excellent! Go on with this." He was very excited by that.

But, when the school year was over and I went home and was thinking about it, I thought, "But I still like comics!" But the whole comics business seemed to be bad, like who would *want* to go into it?

But there was *something* about the comics medium that was irrepressible.

FEATURE: What was it that brought you back to comics and being serious about being a cartoonist?

LASH: The summer following the Kurtzman/Eisner classes--this would be 1974--I took a long, serious look at *The Spirit* and whatever Kurtzman work was available. Without the pressure of the school year, I could consume their work and reflect on what they were trying to pound into us students. I started reading *Graphic Story Magazine.* That was a great magazine, I'd be hard pressed to call it a fanzine, that had features and interviews with people like Howard Nostrand, Alex Toth, Will Gould, and intelligent essays on the comics medium. I was learning and appreciating the aesthetics of the comics form. What can I tell you, Charles, I still liked comics, but I was very uninterested in the comics of the time. I was put off by how "serious" and pretentious the books were. Even then there was talk that the term "comic book" was too derogatory, but what I thought was sorely needed was to get the *comic* back in comics! I really love that bold, thick/thin look of Caniff, Eisner, and Johnny Craig. And I also appreciated Steve Ditko's work where he expressed his objectivist philosophy through comics. I thought comics was perfect for the idiosyncratic, but there seemed to be very little outlet for that kind of stuff., certainly not in any of the newsstand books I kept drawing, even though I was discouraged from being a cartoonist and in the back of my mind I always thought somewhere, somehow, I'd get some of these quirky ideas of mine out, even if it may be a strip or two. In the meantime I thought for sure I was gonna be a playwright or write screenplays for a living.

FEATURE: How difficult was it selling a play or screenplay?

LASH: After school it was like, "So what do you want to do kid?" "I'm gonna write a screenplay!" Lesson number one, Charles, you don't start at the top [Brownstein laughs]. In the meantime I had to make a living. I still drew and I was picking up illustration assignments. Next thing I knew I was getting a lot of freelance advertising work, and when I say that it was like, "Can you paste up this ad for me?" Or, "Can you draw this for my Chiropractor outfit." I think my first big account out of school was doing an educational workbook for second graders, so there was a lot of animal drawing and paste up.

One thing led to another. I was working constantly and even though I had made some contacts in LA, I didn't want to move there just to sell a screenplay. There was nothing certain about a sale. I discovered another thing about myself during these tender years: movies and plays tend to be collaborative arts and I'm a very bad collaborator. As I was doing more work and cartooning for my own personal enjoyment, I really liked the solitary existence. Then in 1979 I was recommended to this weekly newspaper in downtown Brooklyn and they needed some kind of jack of all trades artist to do editorial cartoons and draw stuff for their ads. So I went there, and they used some of my work. Of course, being at a newspaper I said, "Hey, how about a comic strip?" After they said that was a good idea, they should have their very own comic strip and the editor asked me to bring something in. Of course I had nothing, but by the time I went home that night, I knew what I was gonna do and it turned out to be *Wolff and Byrd.* Eighteen years later, here I am.

FEATURE: Tell me how Wolff and Byrd took root in your mind. What inspired these characters and their world?

LASH: Oh, it was definitely downtown Brooklyn. *The Brooklyn Paper* was published out of Court Street, and Court Street is where all the attorneys are in Brooklyn. There's a strip of buildings and just about every office has a small law firm. It's notorious for having the reputation of ambulance chasers and shysters. I'm sure that's an unfair evaluation of it, but that was its reputation. Especially in '79 when I first started working at *The Brooklyn Paper*. So it always had that notoriety to it. Downtown is the municipal hub of Brooklyn, New York, so it was more urban than the rest of the borough.

Pretty much the genesis of *Wolff and Byrd* was after I got the okay from the editor to do the comic strip, I had to show her some kind of proposal the next day. I thought of all the attorneys who got the paper because it was distributed to every office for free in that general area. So, the first thing that popped into my head was, "If I do something about attorneys, I'll have an instant audience." My thinking was the reader would say, "Oh, here's a cartoon about attorneys. I'm an attorney, let me read it." So that's how I wound up doing a thing about lawyers--not because I had no particular interest in the law. I knew nothing about the law. Since I had no interest in the law, I thought, well, maybe if they defended monsters that would make it visually interesting and funny. Now the thing you have to remember is at the time, I didn't think this was gonna go beyond a few months. This was just something I was gonna do until something else came along. So that's pretty much how *Wolff and Byrd* started.

FEATURE: How did *Wolff and Byrd* become, well at least for the last eighteen years, your life's work? What is it about these characters that they continue to stay with you? What continues to attract you to them as an artist?

LASH: I don't know if it's so much as an artist, but as a writer. It took about a year for me to get in full swing with the strip. I was kind of floundering, because, like I said, I knew nothing about the law. I think the first story was about a ghost that haunted one of the buildings downtown. That's another thing, I tried to keep it local. I didn't have a real focus. Like I said, it was just something I was going to do until I did something else; preferably selling my first play. But, I kept at it. I think what attracted me to it was the relationship between Alanna and Jeff. I always liked that male/female partnership that was platonic. There would be a lot of patter between the characters, especially if they liked each other as friends. My inspiration for that was [the television program] *The Avengers*, to a certain to extent. Even as a kid I liked John Steed and Mrs. Peel. They weren't in love, so you had none of that mushy stuff, but they had this smart patter between them that really appealed to me. So that's what kept me going. I thought I could do things with that, and I thought that was fun. But it took me about a year before I figured out what I could do with the entire concept and where to go with it.

FEATURE: After that year, what kinds of stories were you pursuing? How did the focus of the strip change in time?

LASH: Well, I always wanted it to be kind of lighthearted. That first year it was kind of a quasi-adventure type thing. The first one was about a ghost and the trial of that ghost. The second one involved a Satanic cult and Jeff was kidnapped, and it went on too long. That story ran I think thirteen or fourteen weeks, and Wolff and Byrd acted more

like detectives in that second story. That was not the direction that I wanted to go in. At the time that story was wrapping up, there was a news story about a dentist who was putting his patients under the gas and molesting them while they were asleep. This would have been 1980 and it was a big, big news story and his trial was coming up. The first thing that struck me was that it was awfully ridiculous--a dentist of all things! It just perpetuated people's worst fears of the dentist and then some. I thought, "Why not take it another step," and what if the dentist was a vampire and he puts them under the gas to bite them. He goes to Wolff and Byrd to be his lawyers and you move the story on from there. So it was at that point that I found the real direction of *Wolff and Byrd.* I never had problems coming up with stories after that. The ludicrous situation done in a deadpan manner.

FEATURE: How did the characters change over time? Who are they now, what do they mean to you? How have they changed since you started doing them?

LASH: Well, at the risk of sounding corny, they were always *me*. Both of them were my yin and yang from the very beginning. Alanna is stern, no nonsense, assertive, a little cynical. Jeff is kind of a pushover, sentimental, a little naive. So they both represent me to a certain extent. Unfortunately, as time goes on, I'm becoming much more like one than the other. I'll leave it to you to guess which one.

STATISTICS SHOW THAT GLOBAL WARMING IS--EH?
MR. SOOD--!!
MAYBE YOU COULDN'T HEAR ME BECAUSE YOU HAVE POTATOES IN YOUR EAR--BUT I AM HEREBY CHARGING YOU WITH CONTEMPT--
--AND ORDERING THE BAILIFFS TO REMAND YOU IN CUSTODY!

How they changed is hard to say because I think I've changed a lot since that first strip in '79, so I would imagine they have too. With *Wolff and Byrd,* it's not like I'm writing The Great American Novel. The intention was always just to do an entertaining weekly strip. Sometimes the plot took over from the characterizations, but I always liked to mix it up because I didn't want it to turn into soap operas, but other times when personal stories seemed to be called for I'd go into that and develop their characters and personalities. It's hard for me to see that they've changed. Hopefully they've gotten a little more human, though I've gotten more cartoon-like [Brownstein laughs].

FEATURE: How long had you been doing the strip before you decided to do it as a comic book? How long had you been doing the strip before you decided to do it as a full blown comic?

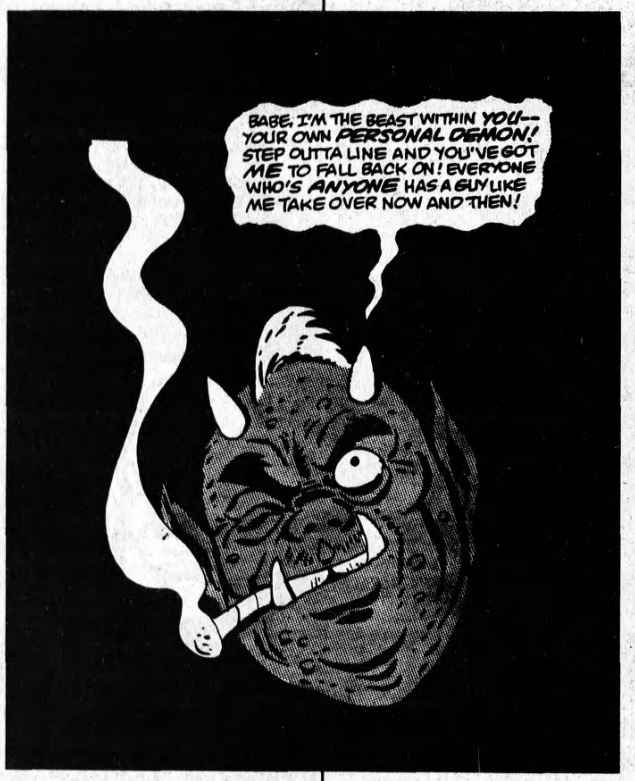
LASH: I'd done it as a strip for fifteen years before it became a comic book. In 1980, at the time I started doing *Wolff and Byrd*, I also got my very first studio with seven other artists. Now here's a tip to any young artists out there: *Do not*, by all means, do not share with more than one person in your studio because it turns into all sorts of chaos, and of course there's office politics. Just avoid it. But, what I'm saying is, I was in that situation and thought, "Look, I've got a comic strip, maybe I can develop some comic book ideas," because I was kind of flushed with the excitement of doing a newspaper strip. So I had done some presentation. God knows where I was gonna go with it, because at the time I knew it was not something Marvel and DC would be impressed with. I seem to recall trying to sell these other comic book ideas to *Heavy Metal*, but that all went by the way side. I had a lot of freelance illustration work and had started a job from nine to five at an ad agency. So I was pretty busy and also didn't think there was much going on in the comic book industry. It just seemed to be a moribund business.

Okay, a couple of years later--1982. The direct market's beginning to really pick up speed. I was in one of the early direct market stores--which was a head shop, but was starting to get a lot of what we now call mainstream stuff--and I noticed *Cerebus.* I had seen it around before that, but I picked it up around issue #39 or #40. I thought I better start paying attention to this because it's not going away. I liked it immediately. I had no idea what was going on, but I liked the storytelling and the tone of the stories. It was intriguing to me to pick up *Swords of Cerebus* to get the back story on this stuff, but what really appealed to me was that the artist/writer, Dave Sim, was putting it together with his wife. That really struck a chord with me. I thought that was a very, very cool thing to do. So that seed might have been planted the day I discovered *Cerebus* of, "Could I really do a *Wolff and Byrd* comic?" But that didn't really pick up speed until many years after that.

At one point the people who put together my first collection, Andrion Books was gonna do a small line of comics and wanted *Wolff and Byrd* to be one of them. I think they were gonna do a three issue miniseries at first. It wound up that they didn't do their line of comics. I think what really planted it in my mind, even before Andrion I got a call out of *nowhere* from Richard Pini who had seen *Wolff and Byrd* somewhere. I think it was running in *American Fantasy* at that time. This would have to have been '86 or so. He wanted to do a *Wolff and Byrd* comic book. I think that's when I seriously began to think of *Wolff and Byrd* in comic book form. I was very excited and he wanted me to send some stuff. He said he was very impressed with it, blah blah blah. Certainly at that point I had certainly known who Richard Pini was, he was running WaRP Comics. I knew Wendy's work and what they were doing. This was very exciting. So I sent him stuff and heard nothing [chuckles]. So after a couple of months I called him to see if he ever got my package and he said, "Yes, I'll call you back in a couple

of weeks." I heard nothing again, so I called him back and that call was the oddest because he was speaking like he had no idea who I was. Why am I bothering him? He totally backpedaled, there was no commitment, and to this day I don't understand what the problem was. So that was my first experience with the fickleness of comics publishers and my first real thinking about doing *Wolff and Byrd* as a comic book.

A few years later there were a few fits and starts, some minor league publishers approaching me. Either the pay was so I would never be able to afford it or they just disappeared. So I began to go back to the *Cerebus* model thinking, "I can do this myself. What do I need these people for?" It seemed they were talking a good game, but when push came to shove there were no promises, certainly no guarantees, and worse, no commitment. Now I'm taking you up to the early nineties and it was like, "Well, if I was ever gonna do a *Wolff and Byrd* comic, I'd do it myself." After a while I met Jackie [Estrada, Lash's wife]. I had known her for a couple of years and at one point said, "I really would like to do a *Wolff and Byrd* comic," and she said, "I'm there for you. I'll help you as much as I can." So that's how the *Wolff and Byrd* comic book was born. I couldn't have done it without Jackie's help. She's a terrific editor and a very harsh critic and I need those two to produce the best book I can.


BABE, I'M THE BEAST WITHIN YOU-- YOUR OWN PERSONAL DEMON! STEP OUTTA LINE AND YOU'VE GOT ME TO FALL BACK ON! EVERYONE WHO'S ANYONE HAS A GUY LIKE ME TAKE OVER NOW AND THEN!

FEATURE: What kinds of things are you able to do in the sequential page art form that you can't do in the strip art form?

LASH: That's hard to say because if you look at some of the early comic strips from the early eighties, you can see that it's a strip aching to be a comic page. I would try different layouts and pack a lot in to the strip. Of course after a while I began to relax with that. Remember when I was said I got the okay to do a comic strip, I said, "Okay, that's fine." Well it wasn't that easy because like I said, it took me a year to find out the direction I'm going in. Then it took me a while to get the hang of doing a weekly continuity strip. Doing a comic book was pretty much the same way. Even though I had done the rare *Wolff and Byrd* five or six page comic story, doing that first twenty three page issue was one of the toughest things I had ever done because there really is a whole science of doing a comic book story. You've got layout, panel to panel continuity. I thought it'd be a snap because at that time I had fifteen years of doing a strip under my belt. I thought, "Now I'm just doing a big strip, that's all," but it's different. I would put it on par with the difference between directing a television show and a movie. You're using a camera, but they're two different media. The same thing with a strip and a comic book.

I'm still learning. I think the advantage of the comic book is that it's all under one roof while the comic strip gives you leeway since its literally separated by days. You can tell the your little story in that six column space and the reader moves on, but in the comic book, you've got a captive audience and you better entertain that person. People have told me, and you might have been one of them, that they noticed that I seemed to get "comfortable" around issue five or six, and that seems about right to me. It seemed to have gotten more natural around that time, because I think the first couple issues I was still feeling my way around the full length comic book format.

FEATURE: What issues and ideas are you trying to explore in *Wolff and Byrd*?

LASH: Well, the whole point of *Wolff and Byrd* is that real life is far more frightening than anything the supernatural has to offer. I'm not saying I'm succeeding, but the goal is to explore that theme. I'm not trying to be maudlin, but in my experience in life, people are very fragile but they're still resilient. I'm not sure how to respond to that. I'm sort of like the guy that suddenly begins to fly and someone from the ground says, "Hey, how'd you do that?" and the guy says, "Uh, I don't know," and he falls to his death. I'm winging it [Brownstein laughs].

FEATURE: *Wolff and Byrd* engages in light satire of law, certainly, as well as politics and the comics business, among other issues. What sorts of things are you trying to expose with that satire? What interests you about this?

LASH: Just the absurdity of zealots. When I say zealots it can be very, very minor league like the petty bureaucrat or the extreme like the career destroying DA or do-gooding activists. That sort of stuff I love to send up. My basic attitude is "People are people and people are no damn good." [Brownstein laughs]. I think I try to stress that the good people are the exception to the rule and most people are just lying, scheming, and status seeking.

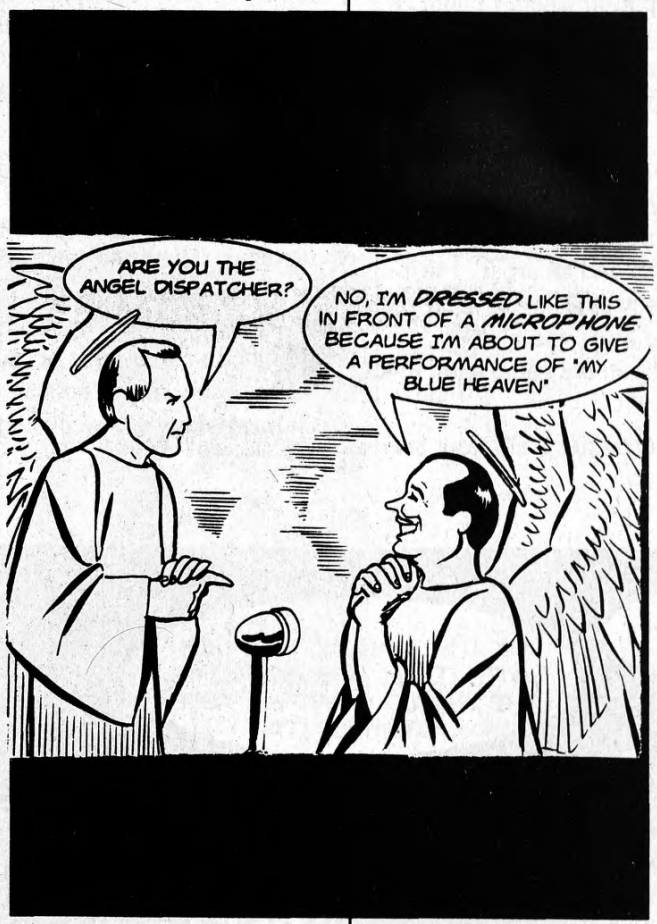
Not every person in *Wolff and Byrd* is like this. Jeff, Alanna, and Mavis are good people, they're nice people. I certainly want the reader to like them. A person who hated lawyers once said to me,"You should have Jeff and Alanna be totally underhanded," and I'm thinking, "Why?" I wouldn't respect a character like that and I wouldn't want to have my lead characters act like that. There are underhanded lawyers

in *Wolff and Byrd,* but not all lawyers are underhanded, despite what people may think.

Speaking of attorneys, I should mention my legal consultant to the book, Mitch Berger. I count on him a great deal because like I say, I'm not a lawyer. Talking to Mitch I'll always get a piece of jargon, a bit of business that he's experienced as a trial lawyer, and just a general feel of the legal profession. I fax my plots to him with my questions and we usually have a many hour discussion about the legalities of everything. After the story is done, I'll fax it to Mitch and he'll look over and see if I'm using legal terms and procedure correctly. Mitch is a funny guy and a comics enthusiast also. I'm very fortunate to have this set up with him.

FEATURE: Moving into the business of *Wolff and Byrd*, you've long been an advocate of self publishing, so what are your thoughts on the current state of that?

LASH: You asked that question and my immediate response to that is, "Twelve hours later, Batton Lash gets to the crux of the problem." [Brownstein laughs] We can be here day and night with that one, but I'll try and sum it up. I personally still think self publishing is the best way to go, despite all the problems I may be having. That's a reflection on me, not on self publishing. After the big blitz of last year when self publishers were going to other publishers because they couldn't handle the business end of it and they're finding out that they could have been doing just as well on their own, just bears me out. I think the market ultimately decides what it wants to see out there. There's the key phrase, the *market* has to decide. I don't think the market has seen most of our comics. At this point the retailer is deciding what the market's gonna see and *that's* gotta change. I still think a lot of people would do themselves well to self publish if anything just to get in the trenches and find out what it's really like out there. I think even a work for hire person isn't really fully aware how this business runs. Knowledge is power and the more you know the more you're prepared to deal with the industry and I think that includes the work for hire grunt. The work for hire grunt tends to be apathetic and just hands the work in, then eventually wonders why he's not getting any work and the publisher may tell him, "Well, the books aren't doing well." The grunt may not have any clue. So knowledge is power and by the nature self publishing you learn every aspect of the business. You deal with retailers and distributors as well as the fans all the time. I think it's still the best way to go.


ARE YOU THE ANGEL DISPATCHER?
NO, I'M DRESSED LIKE THIS IN FRONT OF A MICROPHONE BECAUSE I'M ABOUT TO GIVE A PERFORMANCE OF "MY BLUE HEAVEN"

FEATURE: How are you being affected by the current direct market and what are your thoughts on it?

LASH: The current situation is certainly affecting me because as more stores close and more retailers get conservative in their ordering, it's harming the visibility of my book and the books of people in similar positions. I never really thought of retailers as a conservative lot, but apparently they are. Unfortunately they're getting conservative with the independent books. The argument is that independent books have a limited audience, but I disagree. This is the stuff of endless conversations at conventions and trade shows. There's never been that one brave retailer, in this country at least, that is going after that reader of independent comics. It'll take one to succeed to get the ball rolling

I think the mindset has to change drastically. The comics industry is a very small world, but I think there's room for all of us. The industry after sixty years still thinks it has the same customer. For all the talk that comics are not for kids anymore, they're still treating every customer like it's a fifteen year old male where it's clearly not. They're still selling oranges to an apple audience. It's gonna take one brave retailer to break away from that mold and once that retailer is successful others will follow. But it's gonna take that one retailer and frankly, wherever that person is, I hope that person steps forward fairly soon.

FEATURE: Where do you see the current state of the artform and how is that affected by the business?

LASH: I don't think there'll be any argument that there's *more* top-notch books being done now than ever before. There's so many books being done that of course there's junk, but still the list of quality books is just incredible. There's dozens of titles that are just excellent. For the first time in comics history we've got all kinds of readers, but the industry is still treating the consumer like it's a fifteen year old male. I think we're in a major transition period right now. Obviously it can go either way, but I am leaning toward it splitting apart. I'm not saying to do away with the superhero books. If people like that, that's fine, they should always be around, but there's a big, wide audience for other types of books. This is how the market today is affecting that because right now it's very rocky. I read the new *Tug and Buster* the other day and it was excellent. The idea that it has such a small audience and visibility compared

to more juvenile comics that are out there, the idea that a book like that can go away because of a short sighted market condition saddens me. It can happen, though frankly I don't think it's gonna happen because quality will win out. I think the market is kicking and screaming into a new direction, but once it's there and comfortable it's gonna be a better marketplace. Retailers keep telling me that independents can't carry a store, but I think with what used to be called "yankee ingenuity" and a little elbow grease, the enterprising retailer can sell *Tug and Buster* and other quality independents to anyone that walks in to the store and cultivate a new consumer base.

FEATURE: Where are you heading as an artist and a businessman?

LASH: I always thought this was the perfect occupation for me, because I pretty much did what I wanted anyway. Self publishing seemed like the perfect occupation where I could be my own boss and run my own business and produce my own creative work. Where do I see myself going? I don't know. To be quite honest, I just want to keep putting it out. I certainly don't want to have the Exhibit A Press line of comics because the only thing I'm interested in doing is publishing my own work. I'd just like to do it more often and live a little more comfortably from the profits of it. That to me is my long term goal as a businessman and an artist. I just want to be savvy enough to keep the business going to keep the artist producing and publishing. The artist will always produce, but the important thing is to stay in the game and keep publishing.

FEATURE: What other kinds of work does the artist want to do in the future?

LASH: My real fantasy is to have a small theater where I can write my own plays and have them performed. That's really my little pet fantasy and I can imagine having the same problems with that as I'm having with the direct market. "How do I get people into the theater? Oh my God! The bigger theaters are crushing me out!." But that aside, I'd like to do a goofy crime comic, believe it or not. I always liked the crime genre. True crime has always fascinated me and the goofy stuff appeals to me. Also, I've had a romantic comedy bubbling in the back of my head for years that I'd like to do someday as a drawn novel. I have in my mind drawing it in a different style than I do *Wolff and Byrd.* Certainly no zip-a-tone, for Christ's sake [Brownstein laughs]. But right now, *Wolff and Byrd* is my first and foremost goal. Even though I may have been doing it for years, I still meet people at every convention I go to who never heard of *Wolff and Byrd.* This is their first introduction to it. So to them this is new. Even though I've been doing *Wolff and Byrd* for eighteen years, whenever I start a new *W&B* story I approach it with the same enthusiasm that I had ten or fifteen years ago. I love working on it, so it's not like I'm looking for something else to do. I always felt like something inside would go off that said, "Batton, that's enough of *Wolff and Byrd.* You've had enough, you've done everything you could with these characters." That hasn't happened and I don't expect it to happen because I have a long list of stories and situations I want to do with these characters before I call it quits. I just would hate to call it quits because of some boneheaded marketing problem. What can I tell you? I just wish there was thirteen days in a week and fifty hours every day so I can do everything.

RUN, MAVIS! I'LL STOP THIS THING--
BY THE TIME I'M THROUGH WITH IT, ALL THE VISINE IN THE WORLD WON'T BE ABLE TO HELP IT!
TOBY! NO!! IT DOESN'T MEAN ANY--

REVIEWS

FEATURE #2 SUMMER 1997

PAUL GRIST

KANE

This book missed on me the first time I read it. I'd heard a bit of buzz about *Kane* as it was coming out a few years ago. People were talking about it like it was destined to be a sleeper hit, maybe even The Next Big Thing. Never one to pursue The Next Big Thing, but always one to try to find sleepers if only because the types of book I tend to like fall into that category, I sought out *Kane*. I picked up the first two issues and was thoroughly unimpressed. Not that it was bad, mind you. I could tell that Grist was one hell of a competent artist. His use of heavy blacks with lots of gutter space is very, very attractive and appealing. But the story just failed to grab me. Something about it seeming at first glance to be another cop story. So I put *Kane* aside as something that was well done, but not for me.

Now my first impressions are not always the best things to go on. People on the phone would ask me if I'd read the new *Kane*. Grist was really taking off, I should give it a try, all that. I'd generally say, "Yeah, I've tried it, but it doesn't do much for me." "But have you seen it lately?" someone asked me "No," I answered sheepishly. So I relented and picked up a few issues of the book on my next stop at the comic shop.. As I looked at it, I was wondering what the hell I was thinking when I first looked at the book. This stuff is great! Grist's art started off strong, but had improved by leaps and bounds with each issue. The art sits confidently on the page. Grist is not afraid of white space like so many cartoonist are. He doesn't feel the need to fill every inch of the page, rather he lets the art do what it must do. Because of this, Grist's sense of composition is impeccable. He is easily one of our brighter lights in this area.

Now a comic that's good to look at without a good story is a failed comic. You can have a comic done by Maxfield Parrish, but if it doesn't read well, it's a nice art book, but it can't be called a comic. Fortunately, *Kane* is very much a comic, and a hell of a good one too. *Kane* centers around a very quirky police station in the fictional city of New Eden. And while I love the crime genre, something that this book is a nice addition to, *Kane* is more than just another crime book. Its real charm

lies in the relationships between the characters and their environments. It isn't about crimes, heists, and all that, but about how those things affect people. And astonishingly Grist can explore this milieu without resorting to the tough as nails, Harvey Keitel, grit and grime style of crime storytelling. Instead the crime takes on a very human element. The book is not excessively light, but it doesn't collapse under its own weight either. Grist's story moves along as confidently as his art. His sense of characterization is strong. We know who the people are and we care about them. This is a very important aspect of storytelling, comics or otherwise. Grist's dialogue is crisp, believable, and interesting. His plots strong, and his pacing superb. He infuses his characters with strong personalities, which in turn infuses his comic with a very strong, appealing atmosphere.

Kane is one of those comics than can work on a number of different levels and to a number of different audiences. Anyone who reads *Leave it to Chance* will find much to enjoy in *Kane*, as will readers of *Stray Bullets, Amanda and Gunn,* or any other comic that gives its readers strong characters and an incredibly entertaining read. This comic is well worth checking out.

Fifteen issues of* Kane *and the Burglar Bull Summer Fun Special are $3.50 each plus $1.50 added to the total for postage. A great jumping on point is issue #14 with the self contained "Officer Katie, NEPD" story which has enough charm to make it one of the best comics you'll have read anywhere. Also available are two trade paperbacks,* Greetings from New Eden *and* Rabbit Hunt, *which collect the first eight issues of the series. Those books are $14.00 each ppd. Make checks payable to Paul Grist, Dancing Elephant Press, 207 Marcliffe Road, Sheffield S6 4AH, England.

Berlin Jason Lutes

Of all the comics that appeared last year, Jason Lutes' *Berlin* seems the one poised to make the strongest impression on the artform. *Berlin* is a portrait of the city and its people, notably artist Marthe Muller and journalist Karl Severing on the eve of Nazi ascension in Germany. Historically this is a fascinating period. The world was in the midst of a great economic depression, a depression that hit Germany harder than most countries. Lutes creates a picture of this time that seems to ring true. Many different ideas are in the air: political ideas like Communism and National Socialism (more popularly Nazism), new definitions of art, technological breakthroughs like radio, telephone, and the airship. *Berlin* begins with a portrait of a culture on the cusp of a major change, though none could foresee what exactly that change would be.

Naturally, this comic appeals to the history buff in me, but you don't need to be a history enthusiast to get into this comic. Lutes' characters are strong enough to make the book a very worthwhile read. Severing, the journalist, is maverick. He sees the shape of what is coming and it affects him and his work strongly. He is a very likable character, one that can be related to. Muller too is a strong character. She moves to Berlin to study art and see the city in its

Hup! That reminds me, that genius Fink last night at "Noise and Smoke." —
Here, what's this:
Very unattractive.
National Socialist with an erection!
It's how deep we're in the shit!

many shades and colors. The interplay between these and other characters is crisp. Also strong about Lutes' storytelling is his very good sense of pacing. The story moves along at a speed that is neither rushed nor awkward. The pauses work, the forward movement works. Each panel progresses the story and adds to the incredible impact of the comic.

Lutes' strong art also demands mention. His line style is clean and appealing. He captures the atmosphere of Berlin before Nazi occupation more strongly than any set of photographs ever could Looking at Lutes' art one can see a fascinating balance between the post World War I decay and the first hints of the reconstruction that would come in the thirties. Apart from the wonderful exteriors, Lutes' people are very physically appealing. Their expressions and gestures are always believable and often on money.

Berlin promises to be a significant piece of comics. Though only three issues are out at press time, one can already see that Lutes is building towards a finished product that will be radiant and stunning. Looking at these three issues it is undeniable that *Berlin* and its creator are destined to make a major impact upon this artform.

Berlin ***is published by Black Eye Productions. Three issues are available from the publisher for $2.50 each, a four issue subscription is $8.95. Send check or money order to Black Eye Productions, 5135 Parc Ave., Suite 5, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, H2V 4G3. Address e-mail inquiries to mail@blackeye.com. Black Eye's web site can be found at http://www.blackeye.com.***

JESSICA ABEL ARTBABE

If there is a new wave of alternative cartoonists on the horizon, a wave of cartoonists who will continue to blur the thematic lines between comics and prose literature, then surely Jessica Abel will be one of the more frequently mentioned names in that wave. Abel's *Artbabe* enjoyed modest success as a mini comic until she won a Xeric grant in 1995 that allowed her to turn the book into a full comic. Tiring of self publishing, Abel moved her book to Fantagraphics who recently published the first issue of the new volume of *Artbabe*.

Abel says that *Artbabe* vol. 2 will, for the first three issues at least, run self contained 24 page stories. The first issue's story "As I Live and Breathe," is a very effective use of that form. The story is about the infatuation of a pair of twentysomethings surviving somewhere on the outer reaches of the day-job food chain. They both like each other, but neither one of them is confident enough to say so to the other. Now that sounds very, very clichéd. but Abel takes that common scenario and infuses it with some strong observations about people, city life, and love that elevates it from being an ordinary piece to being a very strong and worthwhile one. I defy anyone to read this story and not relate on some level to the characters in the story.

It is the writing and storytelling that really makes this comic sing. Abel's art is competent, though her ear for dialogue and the subtleties of conversation are what make this comic such a joy to read. *Artbabe* is definitely worth checking out.

Artbabe ***vol. 2 #1 is available for $3.95 ppd from Fantagraphics Books, 7563 Lake City Way, NE Seattle, WA 98115.***

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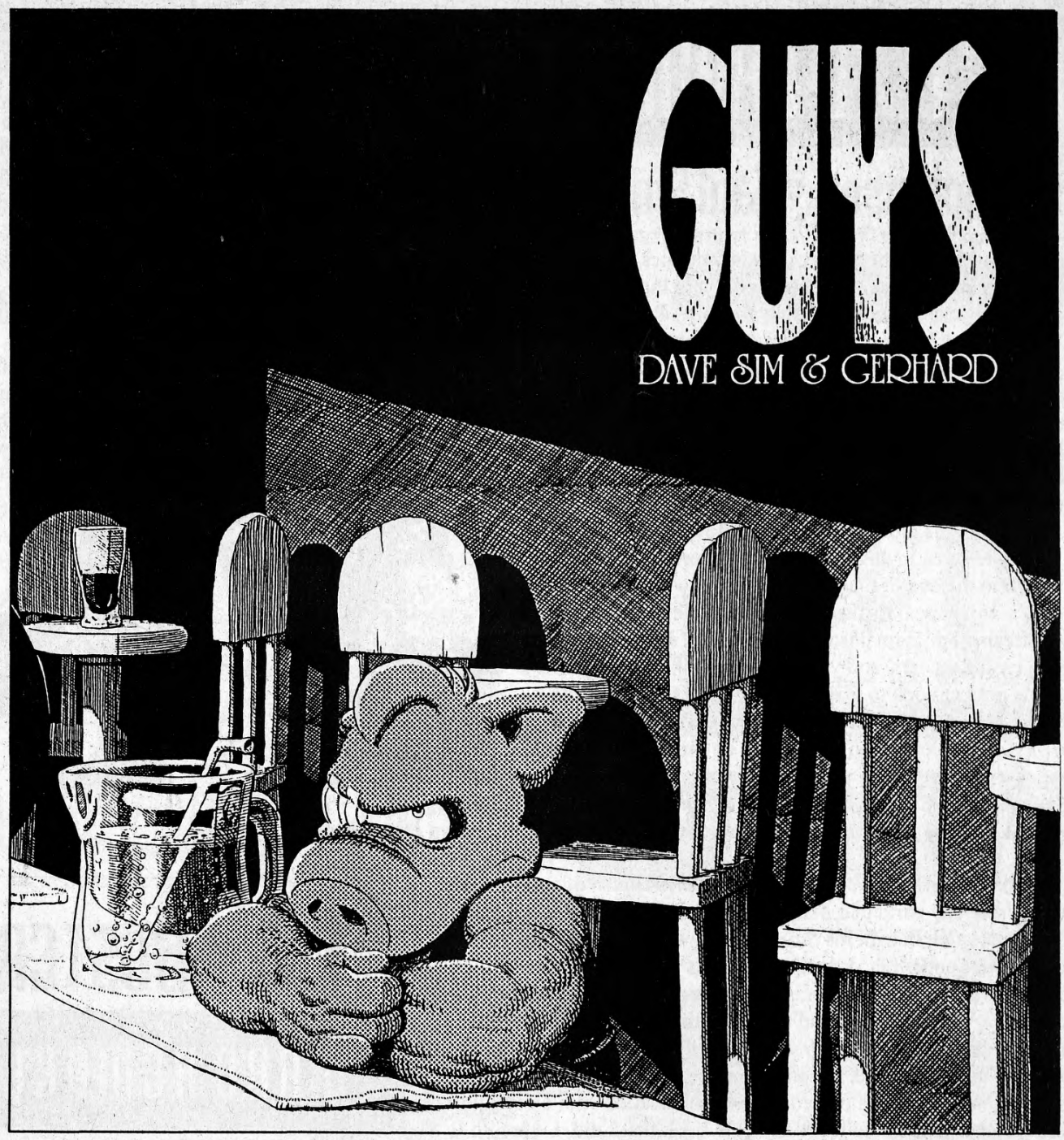

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LEAVE IT TO CHANCE

James Robinson • Paul Smith

In the last couple of years, we've seen a number of "mainstream" creators step aside from that part of comics to produce some strong alternative work. Steve Bissette, Rick Veitch, Charles Vess, and others have taken up the mantle of self publishing and created some lasting material. Following the strong showing from self-published alternative creators who were doing this individualized work, a few creators in the mainstream decided to try their hand at making their individual vision into a comic book. Certainly comics like *Astro City*, *Nexus,* and *ESPers* have made waves in the "alternative mainstream," though my favorite comic to fall into that genre has got to be *Leave It To Chance.*

Written by James Robinson and drawn by Paul Smith, two creators who made their names on custodial work for hire comics, *Leave It To Chance* tells the story of Chance Falconer, a fourteen year old girl who aspires to follow in her father's footsteps as a supernatural investigator. While the concept may sound somewhat old hat, the execution couldn't be further from assessment. The art is first rate. Smith's line is simple, cartoony perhaps, but very, very appealing. His work deviates from most every other mainstream artist working right now in that he is not bogged down by the contorted, angst ridden images that seem to be *de rigeur* for just about any color comic. You won't find any clenched teeth, layers of muscle, impossibly big guns, anatomically impossible women, or any of the other clichés that dominate the mainstream. Instead you'll find an attractive line that invites the reader to linger on the page.

While Smith's art invites the reader to linger, Robinson's writing undermines that invitation by crafting stories that pull the reader through to the end of the book. His story works on a few levels where it will appeal to alternative snobs like me who seldom touch mainstream comics, mainstream snobs who seldom touch alternatives, casual readers, and young readers alike. *Leave It To Chance* is the perfect book to give to your eleven year old sister, but you better buy two copies because you're definitely going to want one of your own once you get hooked on this excellent comic book.

Leave It To Chance ***is published by Image Comics. A trade paperback of the first four issues is currently available from retailers everywhere.***

TUG • BUSTER

MARC HEMPEL

Tug and Buster is another title I didn't think much of at first glance. It's not that I have any particular bias against Marc Hempel. I loved his work on *Gregory*, and thought his *Sandman* run worked well enough (although the color undermined the quality of his work). Given my enjoyment of his previous work, I was very enthusiastic when I heard about *Tug and Buster*. When I finally read the book, though, it seemed to fall a bit short. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't great. I tried the second issue and had pretty much the same response. Another one for the, "good comic, but not my taste," pile. A few months passed and in conversation with a cartoonist friend who had the same initial reaction to the book that I did, I was told I should really give the book another chance. So I did. Next time I went down to the comic shop I picked up *Tug and Buster #6* and wondered what the hell was wrong with me that I didn't love this book from the first.

The comic centers around Buster, a loud little kid with a bit too much blood in his testosterone system (to paraphrase an ancient gag) who worships Tug who is macho incarnate. Supporting characters Stinkfinger and Genital Ben add to the hilarious and dysfunctional displays of manhood seen throughout the book. Hempel hits the mark each time in his light assaults on male bravado, that makes for a very funny book. Making it even funnier are the wonderful pun and sight gags packed into each page. *Tug and Buster* is a very good, funny, worthwhile read.

Six issues of **Tug and Buster are available from Art and Soul at $3.70 each ppd, 7844 St. Thomas Dr., Baltimore, MD 21326.**

BUGHOUSE Steve Lafler

Being an amateur Jazz buff, *BugHouse* appealed to me from the moment it came in the mail. The story of Jimmy Watts, a jazz saxophonist, *BugHouse* chronicles his rise from relative poverty to the top of the Jazz club scene. Jimmy's ascent begins when he joins the band Bug House, a jazz quartet with uncommon talent. Bug House cooks from their first night on stage, which gathers them a huge following. As their following grows and they become more successful, Jimmy becomes tangled up with an addiction to Bug Juice, a dangerous and debilitating drug that shoots him the heights of euphoria and pulls him down to the depths of withdrawal.

Lafler's enthusiasm for Jazz shines through in every page of this comic. Though veiled in insect anthropomorphics, *BugHouse* is faithful to world of Jazz greats Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Muddy Waters, and others--from the rise to stardom to the trials of addiction. Certainly this book doesn't limit itself to Jazz enthusiasts. Anyone can find something worthwhile in *BugHouse*. It is a quirky, enjoyable, funny, and entertaining read that should appeal to anyone looking for something off the beaten path. *BugHouse* blazes its own trail with a story that will appeal to musicians, music enthusiasts, and lovers of character driven comics alike.

The first issues of* BugHouse *are available as a trade paperback that is $14.00 ppd. Issue #5, just off the press for $3.50 ppd. Make checks payable to Cat-Head Comics, PO Box 576, Hudson, MA 01749. E-mail inquiries can be addressed to cathead@world.std.com or http://world.std.com/~cathead.

ACME NOVELTY LIBRARY CHRIS WARE

In an industry that can't agree on what it is, where it's going, or what it wants, it is amazing to find that there are some consensus agreements. Not many, maybe three or four. Everyone agrees that comics are great. Everyone agrees that more people would like them if they were exposed to the form. Everyone agrees that they want more good comics. And everyone agrees that Chris Ware is an amazing artist.

EXACTLY, JIMBO!
LISTEN, MAN... CHICKS DON'T DIG GUYS THAT'RE NICE!
THEY DON'T
NO WAY! IF YOU WANT THE PUSSY, JIM, YOU GOTTA TAKE CHARGE, MAN.
PLUS, YOU CAN'T EVER LET A CHICK KNOW YOU LIKE HER UNTIL YOU FUCK HER, ANYWAY

Acme Novelty Library burst onto the comics scene a few years ago and quickly gained notice because of Ware's stunning artwork and use of different formats from issue to issue of the book. There is not one story running through *Acme*. In any given issue you may find a story about Quimby the Mouse and the tortures he endures, Big Tex, a functionally retarded farm boy whose father hates him, or Ware's most frequently seen character Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth.

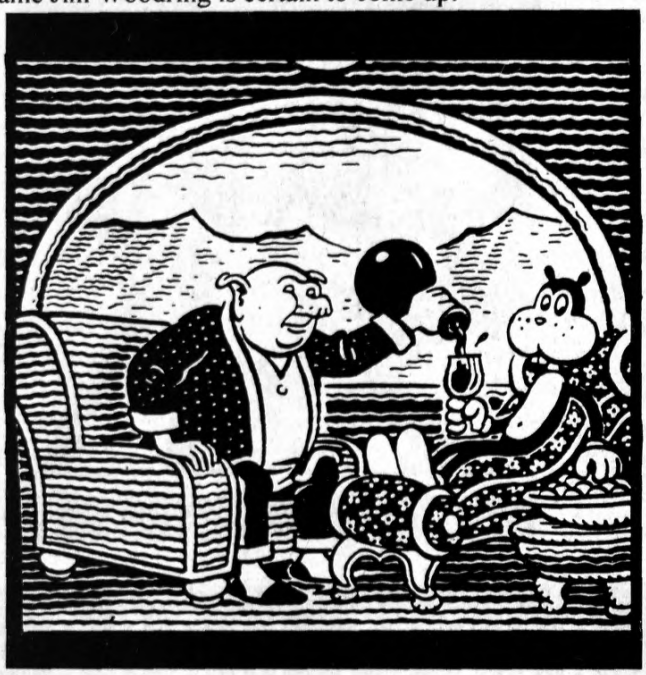
Ware's stories are simultaneously depressing and hilarious, if such a mix can be imagined. *Ware* is currently serializing a graphic novel about Jimmy Corrigan who leads a life filled with regret, missed opportunities, and estrangement from his mother and perpetually missing father. Jimmy's misfortunes shouldn't be funny, but often are. That said, the comic is far from mere humor. Ware's stories are disturbing because of their simultaneous seriousness and absurdity.

Ware's art is phenomenal. His coloring is easily some of the best in comics and design sense is superb. Always innovative and engaging, *Acme Novelty Library* is a gem for serious lovers of the comics form.

Available from Fantagraphics. Call (800) 657 1100. $5.00 for a sample issue. 7563 Lake City Way NE, Seattle WA, 98115

JIM WOODRING

Though it sounds like a cliche, in each field of the arts, the deeper you move into an artform you will find an artist whose work is virtually unknown to anyone but practitioners of that art. This person, this artist's artist, seldom enjoys anything resembling mainstream success, is usually quite a bit esoteric, but at the same time remarkably brilliant. Comics has a few of these artist's artists. There aren't many, certainly; in fact you can count all of the big ones on one hand: Eisner, Kurtzman, Ditko, Kirby, Crumb--those are the major cartoonists who come to mind. As you move away from the big picture and into the many subgenres of comics, you will similarly find other sets of artist's artists. When looking for a short list of great experimental craftsmen, the name Jim Woodring is certain to come up.



I first heard about Woodring through discussions with cartoonists who were hip to his work. They warned that his stuff wasn't going to be the typical thing, but that once you sat down and really got into it, that it would be very rewarding. Well, it's true that Woodring's work is anything but typical. It's surreal, sometimes confusing, sometimes enlightening (but you're not sure why) and always, on at least some level, captivating. Woodring is a master draftsman. His pen and ink skills are stunning. He creates magical and surreal dreamscapes with each line he sets down. As a storyteller, he is a slightly more difficult nut to crack. His dream comics (found in the various *Jim* comics) follow a dream logic that is sometimes clear, but other times will leave you thinking, "What the hell is going on?" That said, fans of Rick Veitch's *Rare Bit Fiends* ought to give Woodring's dreamwork a try. It is at least as personal and intuitive as *Rare Bit Fiends*, though perhaps a bit less accessible. That said, if you really put in the time to crack some of the more esoteric ones you'll find yourself recalling your own dream processes. Reading Woodring's dream comics is not unlike self hypnosis--while falling into his work, images from your own unconscious mind will begin to bubble to the surface.

Far more accessible is Woodring's most recognizable work, *Frank*. Frank, the character, is a non descript animal of some kind. It doesn't really matter what Frank is, what matters is the effect the comics have on you. The non-verbal *Frank* stories rely equally on studies of basic human desires and hallucinogenic imagery to create a surreal, intuitive, pre-verbal experience. *Frank* conjures up some of the more primal, unexplored parts of our nature. That said, the comic is certainly more than cerebral. It is often very funny, and always a joy to read.

Frank centers on the title character and how he gets along in a world of basic human emotions and desires. He wanders aimlessly and on his way encounters the base desires of Manhog and other creatures of instinct. One of the more interesting things about *Frank* is that like Larry Marder's *Beanworld,* it is a comic you're supposed to think about. A line in the introduction to *Frank #1:* "Frank cannot see you, he cannot hear you, but he senses you are there and he looks everywhere for you. He knows that when your light has gone out his song will come into this world no longer. *Frank* lives nowhere but in that magic and indescribable connection between the page and our minds.

Whether you read Woodring's work for the art, for the stories, for self exploration, for catharsis, for a voyeuristic thrill, or all of the above, it is definitely work that's worth reading. It's not the most accessible stuff, but it is definitely worthwhile. And depending on what you put into it, what you get out can be very rewarding indeed.

***Jim Woodring has several books available from Fantagraphics including a 96 page* Frank collection for $14.95, a collection of dream comics in *The Book of Jim* for $17.95, *Frank #1* for $4.00, and a wide variety of other stuff. For a complete catalog ring Fantagraphics at 800 657-1100, or send them an order at 7563 Lake City Way NE, Seattle, WA 98115 and they'll drop a catalog in when they send over your comics.**

STRANGE ATTRACTORS — MICHAEL COHEN + MARK SHERMAN

Strange Attractors has always been a difficult book to pin down. From its first issue as a self published series the promise in this quirky science fiction title was evident as was the tendency of the creators to thumb their noses at conventional wisdom. They decided to do a science fiction comic at a time that science fiction was anathema in the comics market. The protagonist is an intelligent, though somewhat naive, female who is pulled into a series of adventures with her girlhood idol. The comic incorporated most of the elements that made the fifties EC's so damn good: romance, science fiction, goofy looking, yet exotic aliens, great characterization, strong art, a fun and thoroughly readable story. *Strange Attractors* captures that fun and wonder filled experience of reading comics that has been lost in the rise of gritty gun toting heroes, big breasted heroines who fall out of their clothes and onto the page, and all the other absurdities of contemporary comics.

The comic makes good use of comics and science fiction touchpoints without becoming weighed down in nostalgia. It centers around Sophie, a curator at a museum on a distant planet who with her robot Roshi is cataloging the artifacts of her strange future culture. After a failed romance, Sophie finds herself falling into an ennui that is overcome only by a flood of strange and distressing events that lead her to the path of her girlhood idol Pirate Peg. Once on that path, Sophie finds herself at the center of a great many bizarre adventures. Somehow she is the convergence point for these odd and dangerous occurrences, though how she ended up in that position is as much a mystery to her as it is to the reader.

Strange Attractors is informed by a rich language of icons. Sophie is a comic nut, reading *Spicy Space Stories* which runs tales of her heroine Pirate Peg and the Moon Marauders. At first this and the storytelling of the comic appear to be stereotypes, but it goes far deeper than that. *Strange Attractors* uses familiar icons as a departure point into a deeper, more significant story whose meaning is slowly rising to the surface. That said, the book is a hell of a lot of fun, but don't let that fool you--this is more than your average escapist funnybook.

The collaboration between Sherman, the writer of the book, and Cohen, the artist, is a rare alchemy lost from all but the top end of comics. In recent issues, Cohen's art has taken on a strong life of its own. He has created an environment where the goofy aliens and sensible comic book heroines *work*. Meanwhile, Sherman's writing has transcended the feeling of homage to his science fiction and comics idols and taken on a voice and identity all its own. Their pacing is perfect and the writing and art compliment each other more than most any other collaboration on the market. *Strange Attractors* has quickly ascended to one of the top spots on my list of favorite comics and will probably do the same for you. Give it a try.

***Fifteen issues of* Strange Attractors *are available for $3.00 each with the exception of #5 which is $6.00.* Chaos Jitterbug, *a trade paperback collecting the first seven issues is $14.95. These books are available from Retrografix, 67 Emerald St., Suite 623, Keene, NH 03431. Two issues of the excellent mini series* Moon Fever *are available for $4.00 each from Caliber,* 225 N. Sheldon Road, Plymouth, MI 48170.**

NEW LOVE — GILBERT HERNANDEZ

After finishing *Love and Rockets,* very likely the most influential alternative comic of the eighties, brothers Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez moved their personal visions into self contained solo comics. For Gilbert this has meant a set of strong, experimental, and intensely personal comic books.

New Love is something of an enigma. It can't be easily described, because it is such a diverse burst of creative output. Some of the stories are surreal, seeming non-sequiturs, some are light, others very dark, others very revealing and confessional. Regular readers of *Love and Rockets* could see Gilbert moving in this direction towards the end of the series when he did "My Love Book," an atypical, experimental, comics form self-portrait. Some of *New Love* picks up where "My Love Book" left off, while other parts take some of Gilbert's Palomar characters and put them in a new environment. The result is a strange, schizophrenic jumble that may not work for people unfamiliar with Hernandez's work, but is fascinating for those that are. The most accessible stories in *New Love* are "Letters from Venus," an ongoing series of stories and vignettes from the life of Venus, a wise, precocious, inquisitive pre-teenage girl who, over the course of the stories, is discovering some of the many layered

OH, BOLO! YOU RIGGED THE TRAP YOURSELF, YOU SELF-HATING, SELF-DESTRUCTIVE LOSER!
FORGIVE ME, FATHER, FOR I HAVE SINNED... I BELIEVE IN YOU... IN LOVE, IN LIFE...

realities of love and sex. These stories are told in a light tone, though the subtext is much more serious. Hernanadez makes strong use of this dichotomy in these appealing stories.

Probably the best work of this series is the third issue, which runs the story "Driven by Beauty." The story focuses on Pipo, the head of a large multi-faceted corporation, and her son Sergio, a renowned soccer star. The story is in many ways a meditation on sex, wealth, and fame. Definitely a comic for an adult sensibility (I'm loath to say for adults only as I started reading undergrounds years before I was old enough to legally buy them), "Driven by Beauty" is a very readable, multi-layered comic.

The fourth issue of *New Love* moves into a darker direction with some great pieces like "Who Cares About Love," and "Father's Day." The former is another installment of "Letters from Venus," in which Venus learns first hand about heartache when the boy she has a crush on is involved with someone else (and it's *not* what you're expecting). The darkest, most disturbing piece in the issue is "Father's Day," which makes use of stark black and white imagery to tell show the breaking point in a failed family. This is powerful, unsettling work.

New Love isn't for everyone. Chances are you won't like every story you see in it, *but* there is plenty to like in this excellent comic. If you are a fan of the Hernandez brothers, you're already reading it. If you're interested in experimentation in the comics form, then it is definitely for you. More than anything, *New Love* is a strong portrait of artistic transition for one of the most influential talents of our time.

New Love ***is a six issue mini-series available from Fantagraphics. Copies are $4.00 each postpaid. Four issues are currently available. Send checks to Fantagraphics, 7563 Lake City Way NE, Seattle, WA 98115. For a catalog call 800 657-1100.***

THE STAROS REPORT 1997

I'm not one for mutual admiration societies, but I couldn't let this issue go off to press without making mention of Chris Staros' well done magazine. *The Staros Report* is an annual buyer's guide focusing on what Chris judges to be the best alternative comics on the market. I tend to agree with many of his assessments, though that's not the reason I like the *Report* so much. More I appreciate its lucid look at the material it reviews and its lack of preconceived notions about what's acceptably good and what isn't. *The Staros Report* comes from a personal vision of comics, something that I am a very strong advocate of. It is serious about comics and discusses them seriously without becoming pretentious. And while I may not agree with every word Chris puts on the page, I find each word well worth reading.

In addition to being a good discussion of comics, *The Staros Report* is also an invaluable resource. Certainly the capsule reviews of Chris' list of the 77 best comics he's read in the last year is worthwhile when you need some quick information on a book or creator. More than that, the helpful industry addresses, retailer and industry directory make this a reference that shouldn't be too far out of reach of any industry professional or aspiring professional.

Also worthwhile are the comics in here, especially the third chapter of Eddie Campbell's great new *Alec* story. Chris also takes a stab at comics storytelling in some autobiographical stories illustrated by the incredibly talented Mike Hoffman. If you're serious about comics, give this magazine a try.

The Staros Report 1997 and the still fresh 1996 edition ***are available for $5.50 each postpaid. Make checks out to Chris Staros, PO Box 1282 Marietta, GA 30061-1282.***

FOR FURTHER READING

Alan Moore, it goes without saying, has created some of the most significant, influential, entertaining, and enduring comic books of the last twenty years, if not the history of the medium. Much of his work is still available. A short list includes *Watchmen, V for Vendetta, Batman: The Killing Joke, Superman: Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow* (though I'm not a huge superhero enthusiast, this story is astonishingly good), and *Saga of the Swamp Thing,* which are all available in trade paperback through your retailer. If they don't have those titles, they can be reordered through Diamond. DC is also reprinting Moore's seminal run on *Swamp Thing* in gorgeous black and white in the *Essential Vertigo: Swamp Thing* series. Alan has also written a slew of superhero comics for the various Image studios including a stint on Wild C.A.T.S. and *Spawn*. Currently, he is writing *Supreme* for Rob Liefeld's Awesome Entertainment. As for what Alan terms the "serious work," his astonishing graphic novel *From Hell* is available in ten volumes for $5.00 per volume from Kitchen Sink Press, 320 Riverside Dr., Northampton, MA, 01060. Also available from Kitchen are two volumes of his erotic graphic novel *Lost Girls* which are $5.00 each. Tack $6.50 on to your total Kitchen order for shipping. The novel *Voice of the Fire* (ISBN 0-575-05249-X) is only available in the UK at press time, but you may be able to obtain it for ten pounds plus shipping from Victor Gollancz imprint, the Cassell Group, Wellington House, 125 Strand, London, England WC2R OBB. You also might want to try one of those wonderful, musty smelling, used book stores who may be willing to special order it for you. *The Moon and Serpent Grand Egyptian Theatre of Marvels* cd is available in the US on Cleopatra. I've no idea how to obtain *Birth Caul.* Also check out *Cerebus* #117-120 which runs a correspondence between Dave Sim and Alan Moore on *From Hell,* mysticism, magic, art, and comics that is mind-melting and amazing. That stands with the Bill Moyers/Joseph Campbell *Power of Myth* book in a tie for the best interview I've ever read. Those issues are $2.25 each from Aardvark-Vanaheim, Inc., PO Box 1674, Station 'C', Kitchener, Ontario, Canada N2G 4R2. I'm sure I'm leaving something out, but check out Chris Staros' 1996 *Staros Report* (see review of 1997 *Report* elsewhere in this issue for information)--it's got a complete bibliography of Alan's work that will come in handy for the casual reader and anal retentive enthusiast alike.

Peter Bagge is the creator of *Hate, Neat Stuff,* and some other wonderful comics all available from Fantagraphics (call 800 657-1100 for a catalog) *Hey Buddy, Buddy the Dreamer,* and *Fun with Buddy and Lisa* collect the first fifteen issues of *Hate.* Those books are $15.00 each ppd. Also available are *Hate 16-26 for $3.95* each ppd. Bagge's earlier *Neat Stuff* work has been gathered into four paperbacks: *The Bradleys* ($16.95), *Junior and Other Losers* ($15.95), *Studs Kirby* ($14.95), and *Stupid Comics* ($12.50). All are well worth reading. Send your money to Fantagraphics, 7563 Lake City Way NE, Seattle, WA 98115.

Dave Sim is the author of *Cerebus,* which is very likely the longest and most complex comics story that has ever been attempted. Eleven book collections are available: *Cerebus* and *High Society* are $25 each, two volumes of *Church and State* for $30 each, *Jaka's Story* is $25, *Melmoth, Flight, Women, Reads,* and *Minds* are $17 each, and by the time you read this *Guys* will have gone off to press. A regular edition of *Guys* is available for $20, a signed and numbered edition for $30. Also available is *Cerebus Zero* collecting the "in-between stories." That one is a steal at $2.25. Add $3 postage per book collection and send a check to Aardvark Vanaheim, Inc., PO Box 1674, Station 'C', Kitchener, ON, Canada N2G 4R2.

Larry Marder's *Beanworld* is currently available in two collections. The books, collecting the first seven issues of *Tales of the Beanworld* are $10 plus $2 shipping from Beanworld Press, 363 Whitecap Lane, Newport Coast, CA 92657. A new *Beanworld* collection and comic are forthcoming.

Batton Lash, author of *Wolff and Byrd, Counselors of the Macabre* has most of their appearances in print from his own Exhibit A Press. Three *Case Files* book collections are available, collecting four issues each of the *W&B* comic book series. *Case Files* one and two are $12 each postpaid, volume three is (a lucky) $13. Also available are two strip collections, *Supernatural Law* for $10, and *Fright Court* for $12. Uncollected issues #13 through #16 of the book can be still be had for $2.50 each. Send checks to Exhibit A Press, 4657 Cajon Way, San Diego, CA 92115

NEXT ISSUE

Frank Miller leads off this sixty four pager with a *Sin City* cover and an extensive, refreshingly candid interview in which he discusses creativity, comics, art, crime, and writing. **Eddie Campbell** reflects on *From Hell, Bacchus,* autobiography, and myth. Human dynamo **C. Scott Morse** discusses *Soulwind*, zen, pop culture, life in animation, and future work. Finally, **Jason Lutes** gives us a tour of *Berlin*, his ambitious graphic novel which explores the soul of that city on the brink of Hitler's rise to power. All this plus the usual dose of reviews and letters. *Feature #3.* Ask for it in October!

Amanda and Gunn

SOME SECRETS CANT STAY IN THE CLOSET

image

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